BRENTANO'S HISPANO-AMERICAN SERIES

THE MAN OF GOLD

R. BLANCO-FOMBONA

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THE MAN OF GOLD

BY

RUFINO BLANCO FOMBONA

AUTHORIZED TRANSLATION OF THE NOTED VENEZUELAN NOVEL
"EL HOMBRE DE ORO"

BY

ISAAC GOLDBERG

386079
24.10.40

NEW YORK
BRENTANO'S
PUBLISHERS

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THE·PLIMPTON·PRESS
NORWOOD·MASS U·S·A

INTRODUCTION

Rufino Blanco-Fombona (born in Caracas, Venezuela, on June 17, 1874) is easily one of the outstanding figures of contemporary Spanish America. To this eminence he has attained by virtue of a host of qualities that stamp him as an impressive, powerful personality, — a personality that has overflown into numerous channels and brought him well before his fiftieth year a reputation of almost international proportions. He is primarily the man of action, and into his multifarious writings has swept more than a little of that gusto, that fearlessness, that candor, that fairly swashbuckling honesty which have characterized his nomadic, dramatic career. To him, indeed, letters are a form of action, as many of his poems proclaim and reveal; he possesses a sturdy masculinity that cannot brook evasion, hypocrisy, and all the other disgusting bourgeois virtues; he has lived what he has written and striven to be, for better or worse, himself. And in this he has succeeded so well that today finds him an involuntary exile from his beloved Venezuela, resting perhaps from a youth too crowded with high passions and daring adventures, yet as ardent as ever in his service to the America of the great Simón Bolívar.

The story of Blanco-Fombona's life merits a book in itself; perhaps on some happy day he will decide to write it, and I for one am sure that it would possess more than a tithe of the interest that

saturates the pages of Benvenuto, with whom his friends have often compared him. Such a tale would include youthful student days of consular service in Philadelphia, ardent political struggles, prison sentences, travels in the wilds of South America as well as amidst the culture of Spain, France, Holland, Russia; it would hold many a love idyll, at least one murder in self-defence, duels, important publishing ventures, and would reveal, circa 1920, a señor residing in Madrid, conducting a vast literary and historical propaganda (in the best sense of the word) on behalf of Spanish America and planning a few novels to follow up his *El Hombre de Hierro* and the book here presented to the English-reading public, *El Hombre de Oro.*

Up to the present time the works of Blanco-Fombona include five books of verse, three of fiction, two of literary criticism, three or four of history and sociology, three miscellaneous productions (among them the exquisite *Más allá de los horizontes* — Beyond the Horizons — and the kaleidoscopic *La lámpara de Aladino* — Aladdin's Lamp) — and numerous critical prefaces scattered here and there. The man is in everything he has written, but we should be on guard lest his emphasis upon action dulls our appreciation of his more delicate qualities. For there is a delicate side to Blanco-Fombona, — the poet of the *Pequeña Opera lírica* whom Rubén Darío praised so generously, — the novelist who, in "The Man of Gold," could draw so succinct, yet appealing a picture of the three Agualonga sisters in their ancient mansion. His short, but character-

istic foreword to his *Cancionero del amor infeliz* — Songbook of Unhappy Love — is an excellent as well as recent commentary upon his dualistic nature. Belligerently he defends his right to publish a volume of love poems. And there you have the complete man, — fighting for the right to be tender! It is such a strange conjunction of personal forces that accounts, perhaps, for the old strain and the new in our author. He has been likened to a Benvenuto, we have seen, yet in his political and economic ideals he is in advance of his time. He repudiates the labels of any "ism," and heralds a sort of aristodemocracy in which Karl Marx and Nietzsche will shake hands, with Blanco-Fombona in the middle, perhaps, to insure harmony. Quite certain it is, at any rate, that his collectivist views proceed as much from the one as do his individualistic attitudes from the other; these men are, however, brothers who preceded him rather than parents who dictate.

There is in this spirited Venezuelan, then, a peculiarly contemporary blend of the masculine and the feminine, of the past and present, the realistic and the idealistic. He is one of the foremost Spanish-American modernistas, and in his poetry is a close associate of the moody, introspective Mexican, Gutiérrez Nájera, — the brilliant, neurotic Colombian, José Asunción Silva, — the no less neurotic Cuban, Julián del Casal, — and that Nicaraguan genius, Rubén Darío, whose home was the world. He came into prominence with a number of poets (Ricardo Jaimes Freyre of Bolivia, Balbino Dávalos of Mexico, Leopoldo Díaz of Argentina) to whose

names were very soon joined those of Herrera Reissig of Uruguay, Guillermo Valencia of Colombia, as well as the Machado brothers, Villaespesa, Carrère and others in Spain. He witnessed, then, the rise and the successive transformations of that Spanish-American renaissance so inexpressively termed Modernism, — a renaissance inspired chiefly by the French symbolists and decadents, and rooted in a vibrant contemporaneity bent upon shaking loose the shackles of empty rhetoric and antiquated thought.

As regards his personal aesthetics, he has written of it as follows, in the important, scorching Introduction to his *Cantos de la prisión y del destierro* (Songs of Imprisonment and Exile):

"My aesthetics may be reduced to a single canon, viz.: lacking imagination to invent and not being base enough to imitate, I transcribe, now in prose, now in verse, in the simplest, most personal manner at my command, and in all sincerity, that which I think, feel, see. And I laugh at all the rest."

One who knows his work realizes how adequately that canon is stated.

In *Más allá de los horizontes* there is a short prose poem entitled "It is Carnival Time." It was written at least seventeen years ago, but it so illustrates the literary (and personal) dualism of the author — which is, moreover, discernible in the present novel — that I translate it from the original edition.

> *It is carnival time.*
> *The twilight is soft. A golden air kindles the blue flame, the dark pupils of all eyes. Tresses float about. The rose and lilac-*

hued gowns flutter dazzlingly. In shining calashes of yellow, black and red, the belles, with their pink shoulders, their marble throats, sitting amidst white camellias and purple petunias, themselves seem flowers.

It is carnival time.

The bells tinkle; the streamers fly like winged vipers. From the maidens' mouths — crimson slits in the powdered whiteness of their faces — issue chatter, laughter, kisses.

It is carnival time.

The bacchantes gird on roses; the couples weave pagan idylls; love flies, like the doves of Venus, after victorious beauty; the smile is triumphant.

Ancient grief, — whither has it gone?

Ah! That bodice is the blue or white case of sorrows, those costly jewels of the heart; the duchess's hands, those hands filled with roses, have stripped the petals of illusions; the picturesque domino, like a blue book containing golden stories, encloses a tearful tale.

That joy is not free. That song is almost a sob. That merriment is morbid. Otherwise, why does it wear a mask? What is the good of all this masked pleasure? *

It is rooted in Blanco-Fombona's nature to be deeply sensitive to the poetry of things, yet to strip

* Under the title *Carnaval* this same theme is given verse treatment in *Pequeña Opera lírica*, page 121 of the 1919 Madrid edition. (Issued together with the *Trovadores y Trovas*.)

off their masks. Such a bit of mask-stripping, such a spell of poetizing, he accomplishes in *The Man of Gold,* as in his other work. And, let me hasten to add, he does this in his own sweet — and bitter — way, without our common vice of moralizing on the one hand, nor our equally common vice of sentimentalizing on the other. So much does he love genuineness, that he treats it with fondness even when (as in the case of the Agualonga sisters of this book) it characterizes the protagonists of a dying world-philosophy. And only because he loves his country so much does he tear the mask so mercilessly from the face of its rulers. In *The Man of Gold* there are the author's stinging irony, his withering caricature, his intense continental patriotism, his fearless advocacy of a great cause. His treatment is concise, and even his seemingly digressive paragraphs upon Venezuelan history are artistically justified, for they instill a stronger sense of the Agualongas' personal background and hence make one feel all the more poignantly the contrast between these drifting survivors of the past and the unworthy Olgas, Ratas, Chicharras and Irurtias who follow them. Recall that Blanco-Fombona, in his own words, lacks "the imagination to invent." By that same token much of his work is drawn from the life. This is especially true of *The Man of Gold,* and to those who are curious about such things I suggest the perusal of two interesting documents: the introduction to the Madrid edition of *El Hombre de Oro,* and, particularly, the introduction to the *Songs of Imprisonment and Exile* (Paris, 1911), where they may trace some persons and events of the book.

As a novelist, Blanco-Fombona takes his place among an earnest few in Spanish America, where the really modern novel has made but halting progress, and where only now is it beginning to show indications of a genuine, continuous, autochthonous product. As early as his first full effort, *Trovadores y trovas,* Caracas, 1899, that exquisite stylist and fine novelist Manuel Díaz Rodríguez noted in Blanco-Fombona a current of sadness that ran through all his works, and added these significant words: "The most immediate cause of his sadness is perhaps the lack of surroundings, among us, for an artist's soul." Even so, anno Domini 1920, has our own brilliant critic, Van Wyck Brooks, related Mark Twain's pessimism to such a lack in our nation.* Blanco-Fombona, however, is a born fighter, which the glorious creator of Huckleberry Finn was not, and hence he has steadily fought his environment, as he is doing to this day.

Among the foreign critics who have praised the fiction of Blanco-Fombona are Henri Barbusse (who as far back as the appearance of the Venezuelan's short stories in a French version, 1903, recognized the young man's gifts), — José Verissimo, the perspicacious Brazilian who was hardly noted for indulgence, — Gómez de Baquero, who writes such eminently readable things under the pseudonym Andrenio, — that huntsman of degeneration, Max Nordau, who compliments the author of *El Hombre de Hierro* for his Balzac-like scenes and personages, — the delicate Gregorio Martínez Sierra, whose own

* *The Ordeal of Mark Twain,* by Van Wyck Brooks. New York, 1920.

style is so different from that of the restless Rufino, — and the well-known Brazilian diplomat and sociologist, Oliveira Lima.

For such a book and such a writer as this there should exist a public in the United States, — that slowly growing, eclectic public which is sickening of the native Sunday-school fare being forced upon it by the impertinent intrusions of self-appointed moral censors, — of our domestic authors' unwillingness to face the facts of life broadly and honestly, — their incapability of seeing life steadily and whole. Not that we do not possess the artists here, — the native sap and vigor. But the literary environment? The public? The professional pundits? The Puritanic inhibitions?

However, Blanco-Fombona, even after the picture of Venezuela that he presents in this book, courageously affirms his confidence in that nation. And whatever may be said of certain aspects of United States life, — have we not our Irurtias, our Chicharras, our Olgas, our Ratas? — I am filled with a confidence no less deeply rooted. As poor Matamoros, the native healer of this book says, under different circumstances, "We must give Time time."*

ISAAC GOLDBERG

ROXBURY, MASS.
July, 1920.

* For a much longer study of Blanco-Fombona's labors, see my *Studies in Spanish-American Literature*, pp. 307 to 359.

THE MAN OF GOLD

I

WHEREIN APPEARS CIRILO MATAMOROS

IT is Sunday — a Sunday in June. The eleven o'clock sun falls torrid and golden upon the red roofs of the city, flashes back from the walls of the houses, which are painted here a pale green, there a dark ochre, yonder an indecisive sienna, now a dull blue, now a delicate orange, and is reflected from the pavement, striking grayish blue glints from the asphalt.

The straight long thoroughfare, called East Avenue, radiates joy.

A hundred groups of elegant maidens dressed in bright, cheerful colors are chatting as they parade along. The women converse in a loud voice among themselves or with the men who accompany them. They have just come from the last mass and are taking a walk before returning home. Here and there the portly bulk of a mother trails its burden of fifty years after a group of youngsters. Loving couples, hastening or retarding their gait, manage to be left alone beneath the ample golden or purple canopy of an open parasol. From time to time some hurrying sweetheart glides up or down the street, easily detected from the bunch of Sanchorquiz pinks,

Malabar jessamine, María-Enriqueta roses or white Avila violets that he is carrying to his chosen one.

A row of victorias down the street is bound for the San Bernardino diamond, where the final game of baseball is to be played.

Another file of carriages is rolling up-street from the Central Railroad Station, until it breaks up and disappears in the wealthy sections of Alta-Gracia and las Mercedes.

Behind the bars of some windows are clustered women, eager to see and to be seen; at other windows beardless suitors are paying court to fifteen-year-old sweethearts. From one house or another, from between the iron banisters, sounds a snatch of a creole waltz or some Germanic lyric plaint.

A cook who is late scurries along to her kitchen, tottering under the weight of her basket of purchases, over whose edges peer the red heads of the radishes, or the green, refreshing leaves of cabbage and lettuce.

At the foot of the Avenue, where the city proper may be said to end and the environs begin, seeming like an invasion of the countryside by audacious cottages, there appeared a countryman in Sunday clothes — a gentleman mounted upon a nag with neither mane nor flesh.

That horseman was Cirilo Matamoros, a grocer and a country-doctor of Chacao — a queer fellow as they called him in those parts, known by the rural folk in a radius of several leagues.

He was short, corpulent, and in his forties; his insignificant figure gave no indication of how deeply versed he was in campestral science.

The son of a Canary islander and of an Indian mother, Cirilo Matamoros, a brown-skinned, almost beardless mestizo (for a very sparse mustache darkened his upper lip) had, on the other hand, a veritable forest of bristles for eyebrows. The hirsute bar of bristles that rose from his countenance shaded Cirilo's beady eyes, imparting a sullen expression to his features.

This Sunday he wore trousers, a vest of black cloth and a coat of white drill. He had donned a wide-brimmed felt hat of coffee-and-milk color, the front of which was bent down to keep the noon-day sun out of his eyes. He wore coarse, stout, hob-nailed calf brodkins. Upon the black vest, against Cirilo's paunch, bounced a thick, resonant, silver chain, to which was attached his watch, likewise of silver.

His truculent aspect — the deceiving mask of a most kindly nature — was darkened by an apparently hostile, classic silence whenever it was a matter of anything else than expounding the virtues of herbs and roots or discoursing upon the many cures he had realized by applying this and that root or such and such a plant. Then his prattle would run like flowing *caño*. The change was incredible.

Cirilo Matamoros was not one of those black sorcerers with a red cloth over his whitish loins, who prescribed prayers and fantastic remedies; nor was he a swindler intent only upon vile gain, but rather a self-denying, voluntary servant of suffering humanity — an empiric of herbal medicine, thoroughly convinced of the efficacy of creole pharmaceutics.

The owner of a *pulpería*[1] and the possessor of a few parcels of plow-land, he lived upon the income from his dram-shop and his small holdings. As for "medicine," he practised for pleasure. Medicine was his drink — his only vice. At times he would abandon his cattle and his counter, his land and his shop, to travel for leagues and leagues upon his bony nag for the purpose of administering beverages and potions, or applying emollients and plasters to some feverish peon or overseer.

He used to be summoned even to Caracas. Matamoros would publish that fact proudly. "They often send for me from Caracas." Whereupon there would follow the enumeration of his successes in the capital. So-and-so's coachman; a cobbler of San Juan; two Italian umbrella-makers from *The Genoese Umbrella-Shop,* and so on at great length.

That very Sunday, indeed, he was on his way to Caracas, whither he had been summoned by telephone on Saturday night.

It was none other than don Camilo Irurtia who had now resorted to the country-doctor's skill — a wealthy fellow of Caracas known for his niggardliness — an old Harpagon with bursting coffers.

The *pulpería* was thronged with drinkers of *amargo* — a delicious brandy flavored with mint and grape-fruit rind — when with ill-concealed, or rather flaunting pride, Cirilo informed his customers that he would have to close the place and thrust them all into the street. He was going to Caracas. He had been called to Caracas to attend to a case of illness. And as he conveyed this bit of news, Matamoros was

[1] A sort of country grocery store.

not unaware that soon it would speed from coffee plantation to coffee plantation, from *hacienda* to *hacienda,* from ranch to ranch.

The almost superstitious prestige that Cirilo Matamoros enjoyed as a healer would be greatly strengthened by this new token of homage from the capital.

When Cirilo told the reason for closing the doors of his shop before the usual time, one of the *amargo* drinkers asked him:

"And who is it that's calling you to Caracas, Cirilo?"

Matamoros's reply was boastful

"Don Camilo Irurtia, a capitalist whom I know."

Don Camilo Irurtia? None of the peons or overseers present had ever heard that name.

"He'll certainly pay you well," ventured another countryman, turning to Cirilo.

Matamoros confessed not a word about his having previously treated Irurtia without having received a *céntimo.*

"I ask no pay from him or anybody else," replied the doctor spiritedly. "Medicine should be practised without any hope of gain — through love of humanity and the science itself. There are other ways of making money. If I were the government I'd pass a law prohibiting physicians from taking fees. In that way there would be less doctors; and they'd leave the matter of curing disease to us fellows who have a gift for it."

"But he'll pay you something just the same, if you cure him — this señor Irurtia," insisted the peon, "seeing that he is a rich man and that it's the custom in Caracas to pay doctors."

"I repeat that I ask money of nobody; my services are at the command of anybody who needs them and has confidence in them."

Although the country-doctor knew very well that Irurtia would not even give him thanks, he added, for the sake of appearances:

"I don't say that he won't make me some little gift, as often happens with persons that I cure; but I ask nothing."

At this juncture there entered another customer, a lad from Caracas who had recently come to Chacao; he was a servant in one of the neighboring *haciendas*.

In a jiffy he had been told the news. Matamaros was going to Caracas, having been summoned by don Camilo Irurtia. The domestic knew Irurtia, by reputation and even by sight.

"Don Camilo Irurtia? A shrewd creature! A bony, lanky old fellow. Death take him! He's a devil that lives on usury. He doesn't spit out for fear the earth will suck it in. There's not another miser like him."

Then the domestic began to jest with Matamaros:

"And that's the sort of people that call you to Caracas? Fine customers! You've got good reason to be content. Irurtia is a shameless old curmudgeon that sends for you because he knows your weakness and he's too stingy to pay for a doctor."

"I ask no money."

"And even if you did, you wouldn't get it from Irurtia. Catch him giving anything to anybody, — the old tight-fist. The best thing you can do is kill him with those herbs of yours. He won't be

the first victim of your filthy liquids. And besides, some heir will pay you for the favor."

Matamoros shrugged his shoulders; he was silent, disdainful, philosophical. The servant, a few minutes later, left the shop laughing at Cirilo's clientèle and assuring everybody that when it came to giving, Irurtia's hands were paralyzed. The peons, who believed with blind faith in Cirilo's learning, gave no credence whatever to the scoffing gibes of this jesting skeptic.

After the ill-humor of the first moment had subsided and the cloud of anger had been scattered, Matamoros, realizing the stability and the power of his standing among these country folk, and proud that the capital should have called him, even though it had been through the agency of don Camilo Irurtia, mounted Rocinante, which did not cost a *céntimo,* instead of taking the train, and — off to Caracas!

He rode along in contentment despite the gibes of the servant, despite the eleven o'clock sun, despite the asphyxiating eddies of hot dust. And why not? Caracas was calling him; Caracas — glory.

As he turned into East Avenue, Cirilo Matamaros was carried along engrossed in his thoughts of greatness, and engrossed in his thoughts of greatness he spurred his mount up-street.

Matamoros rode amidst the worldly procession of the Avenue with the greatest indifference. That wave of elegance was rushing toward him; from out of this ocean of the capital's populace had risen voices that reached to the obscure shop of Chacao, imploring the services of this modest, quaint fellow.

And the modest quaint fellow was not at all to be sniffed at, despite the scoffing of a flunkey or of academic presumption.

The growing number of coaches obliged him to stop his horse for a moment between two victorias. One of the coachmen, trying to play a nasty trick, cracked his whip over the nag's bony haunches. Matamoros heard behind him the provocation of the whip-snapping and he wavered with the sudden movement of the jade, which had been hurt by the lash of the whip; but he merely cast upon the Jehu a look more of disdain than of anger, and continued on his way, as well as he could, without saying a word to the insolent fellow.

Reaching Candelaria Square he turned to the right.

He advanced more than three hundred metres yet he could easily imagine that he had come into a different city; the houses were lower than on the Avenue, the windows more narrow, the walls less brilliant, the doors less severe, and the street was not filled by an elegant public; only some artisan here and there in quest of his lunch. At the doors and behind the shutters were visible the dark-complexioned womenfolk, standing there either in curiosity or waiting for brothers, fathers and husbands whom, perhaps, they feared to behold returning from the dram-shops with two or three drinks more than usual.

On a corner various ragged urchins from twelve to seventeen were playing at *chapas,* tossing five-*céntimo* pieces into the air to win or lose according to whether the coin would fall on head or tail.

Somewhat farther on, the horseman stopped before a gray, defaced cottage with a single window, a low roof, a closed door and a sordid appearance. The window, crossed by wooden bars, had its shutters almost entirely closed like two eyelashes. The drawn shutters looked like deceitful, squinting eyes.

The ramshackle, discolored door had an iron knocker. The house, with its air of mistrust, its shutters that seemed to pry upon the vicinity, its well-closed door, contrasted with the dwellings of the neighborhood, whose wide open front doors seemed to invite the passer-by.

The new arrival knocked at the door without dismounting. As nobody replied, after a moment's wait, he knocked again. The silence scarcely answered. For a third time he struck the mute door with his knuckles. A thin, old face appeared at last behind one of the shutters, asking:

"Who is it?"

"A man of peace," replied the horseman.

The old man must have recognized him, for he said:

"Ah, is that you, Cirilo? Just a minute; I'll open the door for you."

The countryman, having dismounted, was fastening his horse to the bars of the window when the door opened. The old fellow — a long-shanked, wizened, big-jawed creature — exclaimed to Matamoros in alarm:

"Are you going to leave your animal here, in the street? Aren't you afraid that it'll be stolen?"

"Let them steal it," replied Matamoros, about to enter.

The other, however, insisted, with astonishment:

"Don't be absurd. They might steal the horse, or the saddle, or a stirrup. You'd better leave your horse here in the *zaguán*." [2]

With the consent of the rustic, the lanky, hawk-like old man appeared more at ease.

They entered the corridor, conversing.

"But you don't look as if you were ill, don Camilo."

"Fortunately, that's so. I'm not the sick one."

[2] Outer passage or vestibule, leading to *patio*, or courtyard.

II

CAMILO AND TOMASA

AND truly the sick one was not don Camilo Irurtia, but Tomasa, a sallow old rheumatic woman who served him.

Irurtia had never had any other domestic servant than that witch with the white, dishevelled hair.

An old mahogany cabinet and Tomasa, both of them family heirlooms and both older than Irurtia, had accompanied him since the flourishing days in which Irurtia, first a commercial clerk and then a book-keeper, had lived with his mother and his two sisters.

His mother having died and his two sisters having married, Irurtia took reckoning: living alone, on account of the washing and the cooking, would cost him more than to live with Tomasa. He rented a room which he divided in two by means of a red curtain. In one of the halves he established himself and his maternal mahogany cabinet; in the other half he put Tomasa.

There she did the washing of the house, or, rather, of the room; there she ironed; there she cooked for herself and Camilo, though she nearly stifled with the smoke; there she slept upon a mat which, at daybreak, she would roll up and place in a corner, always the same.

At night, at the hour of retiring, Tomasa would turn her face to the wall so as not to see, through the transparent curtain, thanks to the candle, don Camilo in his underwear. Irurtia, when he discovered this, obviated the difficulty by determining that they should undress in the dark. "We'll save something by doing away with the candle," he thought; and turning to Tomasa he asked:

"Who ever said that people need light to undress?"

He never paid the dishevelled old woman. He shared with her a wretched, chaste existence. And Tomasa, bound by affection, by indolence and by the fear of the unknown to this man, whom she had brought up from his very birth, asked nothing better. At very rare intervals Irurtia would slip a small coin into her hand, or would present her, for Holy Week or New Year's, with a piece of chintz or some cast-off garment bought for seven or eight *reales* at the Saturday sales in the pawnshop.

Camilo was saving up little by little, very quietly, as if in secret.

Economical by instinct, at first he kept his meager wages as book-keeper almost intact, living with less expenditure than a spider. Then he began to lend out money to the young employees and to the spendthrift janitor of the store, with the guarantee of the cashier and all manner of written and unwritten pledges.

The money-lender himself collected the wages of his debtors, discounted and retained the debt and the stipulated interest — never less than twenty-five per cent — and returned to each one with

scrupulous honesty, though not without pain, the balance of his monthly wages.

As his capital increased, so did Camilo's lust for gain. Then he commenced to loan money to needy folk upon articles of little value: sewing-machines, carpenters' saws, masons' trowels. And some of his clients, having nothing else to pawn, brought carpets, lamps, stew-pots, bed clothes and clothing.

Camilo accepted everything and moreover, everything remained in his possession at the least deviation from the letter of the agreement; at times he would also resort to tricks and subterfuges when the debtor, some poor devil or a helpless woman, would permit himself to be robbed through fear or gullibleness.

His fruitful money kept on multiplying.

Irurtia gave up book-keeping for the store in order to devote himself to his own accounts. He required a more capacious place for holding objects as heterogeneous as they were many, and he moved.

This change of residence was the subject of long discussion and staying up late on the part of Tomasa and Irurtia. Although Tomasa heard and saw through the ears and eyes of Irurtia, admiring him and rendering him blind obedience, although she possessed a clear notion of nothing and was the least practical creature on earth, Camilo frequently consulted her upon matters of minor consequence; this provided him with an opportunity of speaking to somebody, for neither his nephews nor his sisters visited him, nor did he visit them but a single time during the year, or less, fearful lest they should make him the victim of some loan.

Tomasa treated with him on familiar terms, as one who had been in the family service when he was born. They would become involved in discussions respecting the convenience or the inconvenience of the new dwelling, now during a meal, or again at night, by the light of the waning tallow candle that lighted up both divisions of the room, to the right and the left of the red curtain.

Tomasa would always conclude by accepting Camilo's opinion:

"That's it; you are right: three rooms and a kitchen. I'll sleep in the kitchen. You'll sleep in one of the rooms, and the other two will serve as reception rooms for the persons who come to do business with you and as depositories for the *corotos* on which you lend out money."

But suddenly it occurred to Camilo that three rooms and a kitchen were a needless waste. Two rooms and a kitchen would suffice. They would nail up boards, in the manner of shelves, so as to take full advantage of the wall space, and thus they could fill the room as high as the ceiling with the pawned articles — with the utensils, the clothes or *corotos,*[3] as Tomasa called them — without the necessity of paying rent for a third room.

"Yes, that *is* best," agreed Tomasa, convinced.

At last they moved. Irurtia, lucky and inflexible fellow that he was, found just such a place as his stinginess had visioned.

"Any other man would have looked for ten years

[3] An Americanism equivalent to Spanish *trastos, trebejos,* i.e., trash, gew-gaws, implements.

without finding such a place," said Tomasa, voicing her sincere admiration.

Irurtia's affairs were sailing along at full speed.

In the room given over to the *corotos* there were soon heaped up saddles, beds, musical instruments, porcelain vessels, books, clothes, daggers, muskets, Winchesters, swords and a genuine Turkish scimitar.

In the historical mahogany cabinet, to which had been attached a most complicated safety lock, Camilo concealed beneath quilts and rags, four or five little chests of stout *araguaney* bordered with strips of iron. One of these coffers in the smallest of its compartments, contained little silver coins; in the other it held gold coin and bank notes; above all, gold coin. And as Irurtia's clientèle and business grew better from day to day, the other coffers contained pawned jewelry: earrings set with precious stones, diamond rings, pearl necklaces, plain wedding rings, tiny ladies' watches with initials made up of rubies and sapphires, scarf pins, stones set in the form of a daisy, brooches, gew-gaws and gold crosses. Yes: the rich, too, found their way to Irurtia's hovel. The rich, too, needed money. The rich, too, thanks to the wiles of Camilo, lost at times, their crosses of gold and their diamond rings.

And even when they did not leave their pledges behind, they left a good bit of money. Irurtia was terrible; a vampire of gold. And how methodical this trickster was!

Every jewel, carefully wrapped in yellow tissue paper, bore its ticket — a strip of white paper — and on the ticket stood out in red ink a name, a date, a

number and two or three cabalistic signs that only Irurtia could ever decipher.

At about this time there occurred an incident of transcendent importance in the life of the usurer.

The miser was visited by robbers during the middle of the night. These bold, noiseless poltroons worked their way into Camilo's rooms, gagged and bound him as well as Tomasa before either of them could have said "Jesus," and throwing aside articles of little value began to rummage about for the gold coin and the jewelry.

As Irurtia's luck would have it, two men of the neighborhood who happened to return home late that night, heard a certain suspicious noise and spread the alarm. The neighbors came running to the rescue, and at last the police arrived, and the three rascally fellows who had tried to rob Irurtia were trapped.

Irurtia did not lose a *céntimo.*

Camilo and Tomasa had received a terrible fright. No sooner did it get dark than the old woman would tremble with terror; her teeth would chatter and at the sound of a door being slammed or a window being shut noisily, she would bound as if shot upwards by a spring.

Irurtia fell ill and had to take to bed with cerebral fever. In his delirium he could behold powerful arms clutching him so tightly that they strangled him — fingers like claws tenaciously seizing his throat; hands of prey swooping down upon his *morocotas, callaos,* ounces, pounds sterling, louis d'or; figures of bandits gliding in the shadows, their

faces masked, holding under their arms packets of bank notes that they had robbed from the mahogany cabinet.

"They're hanging me, Tomasa!" the poor delirious fellow would gasp. "The bank notes, the gold. They're robbing me. Thieves!"

Little by little he recovered. It had been necessary to call a doctor, without consulting Irurtia, who would have had none of it. The physician charged dear, excessively dear, according to Camilo. That was a species of robbery authorized by the law.

"Between this bandit and the others," he asserted, "I prefer the others. At least they expose their lives."

Such was Irurtia's excitement that they feared a relapse. Ever since that time he investigated matters so as to be prepared for future contingencies. Ever since then he began to deal with Cirilo Matamoros, the renowned *curandero* of Chacao who not only never accepted money for his medical services, but even made a gift of the medicine to his patients.

Cirilo Matamoros certainly attended and treated Irurtia and Tomasa respectively with the greatest success, whenever either of them fell ill, which, it may be said parenthetically, occurred almost never. Besides being healthy persons, they both led a hygienic life without any set purpose to do so — a regular life, without excesses, rising early, eating little, drinking only water, and indifferent to anything that did not concern them directly. How and when, then, were they to get sick?

"Welcome, ill luck if thou comest alone." After his brain fever and the robbery, Irurtia might have repeated this proverb, and he would have done so with good reason.

The search made of Irurtia's house by the police, on account of the robbery, or the attempt at robbery, had serious results for the usurer.

The authorities discovered that Irurtia was carrying on a money-lending business without the knowledge of the law, and without paying the license-fee which, as a pawn-broker, he owed to the state. Late indeed did the law open its eyes to this law-breaker who for years and years had outwitted it; but the law made up for its oversight.

Irurtia was heavily fined; all annual arrearages of the fee which he had never paid were collected, plus the interest on the principal to which the evaded tax amounted; he was forbidden to carry on his money-lending by the imposition of exorbitant rates upon each victim according to the whim that seized him; he was reminded, finally, of the percentage to which the law compelled him to limit himself.

That blow, a consequence of the shock of the robbers, and a hundred times harder and more overwhelming than the latter, almost undid Camilo Irurtia. He thought he would die. In vain did he consult lawyers; in vain did he attempt to bribe minor government employees; in vain did he struggle to free himself from the mountain that was falling upon him. All in vain. The mountain crushed him. The law, blind, deaf, merciless, vindictive — tore the very entrails out of the delinquent. What

an injustice! What an abuse of power! The entire social organization was defective; he realized that now. All that the Government thought of was to rob its citizens. Venezuela was a ruined nation. Ungrateful country.

He even thought of leaving the land. But his interests and ambition held him back. Very soon he discarded all notion of emigration.

It then occurred to Camilo Irurtia to wreak vengeance upon the present government, which he blamed for the heavy fine that had been imposed and for the regulation of usury. He revolted against established order. He even went so far as to consort with professional revolutionists. Only the revolutionists frightened him with requests for money. Whereupon Irurtia renounced the revolution.

To loan out money at less than 25 or 30 per cent per month seemed to him utter absurdity. He was not disposed to commit any follies. He gave up lending money on jewelry and clothing, under the eye of the police. He longed for that liberty of action which he had enjoyed before.

He went into the business of making loans to employees of the ministerial departments. The law had no provisions for such cases. And he knew, from his experience with the old, modest loans made to the men who worked in the place where he kept books, the sort of surety that he could and ought to get. The functionaries would sign their names to incredibly extortionate documents, on state paper, affirming that they had received such and such quantities — three or four times what they

had really received — and promising to pay them off every two weeks.

These morsels seemed slender indeed to Irurtia's gullet.

Then he began to buy old buildings and remodel them. Scarcely had he begun to taste the luscious honey of this form of usury, which by a hundred subterfuges circumvents every provision of the law, when Irurtia became a specialist in the matter; or to state the case more exactly, he chose as his specialty that sort of business which is known as dealing in remodelled property.

Before long he was the owner of properties, which he was wily enough to acquire for ridiculous sums, thanks to one pretext or the other, and fully protected (he saw to this point!) against any legislative punctilio. Experience had taught him. For the purpose of circumventing the law he learned all the skillful wiles of a pettifoger.

"Why," asked Tomasa on a certain occasion, "if you own various houses, should you live in these two rooms that are owned by somebody else and for which you must pay rent?"

"I've been thinking about that for some time," replied Irurtia to the old woman. "Above all, we'll be far more comfortable. I'll be able to receive the people that come to me on business in a decent manner."

"At our present expenses," added Tomasa, "we'll be able to live ten times as well."

"Yes, we'll be ten times better off," argued Irurtia, "but not at the same cost as at present. It'll amount to something more — only a trifle dearer; but something more, at any rate."

This was the third time in all his life that Camilo Irurtia changed residence.

The house, situated in the parish of Candelaria, toward Gamboa, was the ramshackle place where Cirilo Matamoros, the *curandero* of Chacao, found him that Sunday afternoon in June.

No sooner had Cirilo learned that the patient was not Irurtia, but Tomasa, than he was slightly disappointed. After all it was not the same thing, nor did it possess the same significance for his reputation, to treat a capitalist as well-known as Camilo Irurtia or an aged servant. But his vocation, his eagerness to bestow his remedies, his mania for prescribing got the better of Cirilo Matamoros, and he began to inquire with genuine interest into the illness that troubled the housekeeper.

"Pains all over her body," informed Irurtia, vaguely.

And he added:

"Let's go to her room. You'll judge for yourself."

Yellower than ever, lying upon a cot, without any bed sheets, wearing a short mantilla that had seen far better days, a frayed, faded, grimy shawl, the poor old woman, with her dishevelled white hair flowing all over the filthy pillow, complained of shooting pains in her bones, especially in the right leg.

Matamoros made further inquiries. He examined her flabby leg from the thigh to the heel, moved the joints, looked closely at the knee-caps, then inspected her elbows, her wrists, her finger-joints, and concluded with an absolute certainty that was truly doctoral:

"Rheumatism!"

"And what shall we do to her?" asked Irurtia.

"First of all we must apply a *clusia,*" replied Matamoros.

"And what is that?"

"It's a medicine which the foreigners . . . "

He was not permitted to finish. Irurtia had brought his hands to his head.

Apothecary remedies? Medicines that cost a fortune and don't cure? Cirilo had gone crazy or had been infected by the example of the doctors in Caracas, who thought that they could cure anything with bottles of medicine that cost twelve *reales* apiece. What about those curative herbs that Cirilo always brought with him, which he never refused to the sick, and which, as soon as they had been brewed and drunk, banished the most obstinate ailments?

Cirilo listened silently. After Irurtia had concluded his outburst of horror, the herb-doctor repeated, solemnly:

"First of all, *clusia,* as the foreigners call it; or, according to our native speech, *copey.*"

"Ah! A native plant? Excellent!"

Irurtia waxed radiant.

The old woman began to complain that she could not stretch her leg.

III

A MISER'S HOUSEHOLD

DON CAMILO rose with the dawn, as usual. Tomasa, despite her rheumatism, the pains of which were sharper than ever in the cold of early morning, was already heating the breakfast coffee upon the kitchen range. When the coffee was ready, the old woman called Irurtia, who had begun squinting through the shutters into the street.

"Camilo, come and have your breakfast."

Camilo and Tomasa sat down in fraternal, democratic fashion at the same table — a square little affair covered with a faded oil-cloth which once upon a time had been of chocolate color, and where the coffee cups and the hot dishes had left yellowish circles resembling the halos of saints.

The cups, in reality, were not of the ordinary sort, but were chocolate cups of coarse white fayence with three or four roses painted upon them by way of flowery adornment. They seemed to smile out of their chipped edges; the roses had faded with use, turning into flowers of an anemic, pale, almost white pink.

The coffee steamed, black and odorous, despite the excessive amount of cane liquor with which Tomasa had baptized it to add to its strength. Beside each cup of coffee a small loaf of wheat bread, fresh from

the oven, awaited the diners' teeth. Two gulps of coffee flavored with cane liquor and a *centavo* loaf of bread: this was the breakfast.

With such provisions in their stomachs Tomasa and Camilo waited till noon. Camilo desired to avoid digestive troubles as far as possible.

"Folks eat too much in Caracas," he would often say.

And he would expatiate upon his idea:

"A plate of *sancocho*[4] at noon, plus three, four and even five heavy dishes, in this climate spells sheer nonsense. The stomach gets full, the brain is stultified. Hence the necessity of the siesta; hence nobody can work, or at least nobody can do any good work in certain regions of Venezuela after the noon-day meal. They lose an hour and a half to two hours every day. Life is shortened. Capacity for labor is decreased. And since the general activity of the nation depends upon the sum of the individual activities, what is the result? The result is that in Venezuela the evolution of the country is exceedingly slow; progress walks with leaden feet; the republic rides on muleback, not by railroad."

It was a veritable theory. And don Camilo would always sign his speech with this sentence:

"*Sancocho* is Venezuela's worst enemy."

And for this reason, perhaps, don Camilo, an excellent patriot when he could be so without any expense to himself, had exiled the classic dish from his table. Don Camilo was a vegetarian. He subsisted on green stuffs. As for yam, carrot, sweet-

[4] A stew of meat, yucca, bananas, etc.

potato, *ahuyama, mapuey* — he would have none of them. Celery — no; too costly. Now and then an egg omelet; at other times, fried bananas. For the mid-day meal he would be content with garlic soup, or old bread, a few kidney-beans or black beans, and a pan-cake. Meat, never! such poison!

Before beginning his breakfast Irurtia asked the old woman:

"How did you spend the night?"

Tomasa complained of much pain. Toward day-break the cold martyrized her. She could barely stretch her leg. Those finger joints of her left hand were beginning to swell.

Irurtia began to console her. She must have faith in Cirilo Matamoros, and particularly in the herbs and beverages that he gave free of charge. Matamoros knew far more than the university doctors.

"Right away; you saw for yourself. He didn't hesitate a moment in recognizing your rheumatism. One of our cheap Caracas physicians wouldn't have ventured an opinion before three or four visits and three or four bleedings of his neighbor's purse."

He was filled with rancor against the physicians because one of them had "robbed" him at the time of his brain fever. He was terrified by the thought that it might occur to Tomasa to ask the services of a regular doctor. Thus, at the same time that he praised the free Cirilo Matamoros higher than the horns of the moon, he decided to make use of the opportunity to decry the regular profession once more. With this object in view he began a tale.

"Just see, Tomasa, what these wretched physi-

cians are. At Empedrado, beyond Palo-Gracia — you know the place — a certain fellow began to complain of pain in one of his ears. The doctor that he called in made one visit after the other, trying remedy after remedy. All in vain; the patient did not improve. The doctor, zealous, conscientious, serious, continued to come, promising him a speedy cure and collecting five *bolívares* for every examination. One day the doctor, who was an old man, fell sick abed and sent as his substitute his son, who was also a doctor. When the young doctor examined the fellow's ear he exclaimed: 'Why, my good chap, what you've got here is a sheep-louse!' And with his tweezers he pulled out the insect. From that very moment the sick man felt relieved and he needed no further treatment — no more drugs, no more prescriptions, no more doctors, no more paying five francs every time the physician came in to ask him how he felt and then write down unintelligible words on a sheet of paper to take to the pharmacy. When the old doctor got out of his sick bed, fully recovered, his son told him all about the case. 'I cured that man at Empedrado in a jiffy, simply by taking the sheep-tick out of his ear.' The father could not get over his amazement. 'What! Have you gone and committed such a folly? With that louse, which I cared for with the utmost solicitude, I fed my family for several days. My son, you love science; you know the profession. That is not enough. You must learn the art of practising it.' "

Tomasa had a good laugh over the story without seeing through Irurtia's intention in telling it; and

as it was already time, they rose from the table. Tomasa, limping and complaining, began to sweep the house, starting with the *zaguán*, while Irurtia walked over to the window that looked on the street.

It was seven. In a few moments the newspaper-vendors would come by. Irurtia began to watch for them.

Every day he bought *El Noticiero* — one *centavo*. What the deuce! A fellow must know what's going on in the world. He had certain interests; he played the stock-market. A violent turn of politics — any incident at all, might cost him money. With such arguments as these, and others of more recondite, complicated nature, not devoid of practical considerations, Irurtia explained and justified to himself the resolution — which had been a long time arriving at maturity — to squander five *céntimos* every morning upon the purchase of *El Noticiero*. At any rate, every morning after breakfast he would watch at the window for the news-vendors; then he would sit down in the corridor to devour the six pages of the newspaper from the title down to the very last word of the advertisements. Afterwards, folding it carefully up, he would put it away to make pound bundles which he later sold to the shops for wrapping paper.

While Irurtia read, the old woman swept the house.

The labor of sweeping gave the rheumatic housekeeper little pain; the house was short and narrow.

Crossing the very small outer vestibule one encountered first of all the corridor, which was three of four metres square. On this corridor opened two

doors — the door to the parlor and that to Irurtia's office. The corridor was followed by the *patio* — a diminutive, rectangular inner court; at the left was Camilo's bedchamber, and at the rear a wooden partition which served as the boundary between the *patio* and the dining-room.

Beyond the dining-room another yard, smaller than the first, served as poultry-yard, washing-place, bath, dust-bin, toilet and what not else. The kitchen and Tomasa's tiny room received light and air from this small, ill-smelling yard whose dirty red stones, because of the dampness, were covered with a thick greenish moss.

The rooms were all small and square; in Tomasa's ugly habitation the oozing dankness traced a dark wainscoating upon the wall.

As the flooring of the house was of brick, every time the place was swept there would rise in the dining-room, parlor and forward yard a reddish dust that stuck to the lime walls, coverting them into hangings of grayish, yellowish, grimy spots. From the beams and slates of the roof — for there was no ceiling — there hung in every corner thick spiders' webs, slaty lumps, hammocks and fly-snares. Tomasa's house-cleaning was a mere formula, a pretext to keep busy; the house always looked like a pig-sty, or very nearly.

No sooner was the sweeping done than Tomasa, seizing her feather-duster, would hobble along, her white tousled hair fluttering in the air, to begin her perfunctory cleaning; she did this once per week.

She began with the corridor. Plain furnishing:

two chairs of ordinary wood stand by a table that is varnished a dark color and has no cover. Hanging from the roof, in the center of the room, a heavy, antideluvian bronze lamp provides light during the early night for the conversations between Tomasa and don Camilo. A bamboo rack receives the hats of the visitors when the visitors — that is to say, the men who come on business — do not leave their hats, canes and umbrellas upon the dark table.

As soon as she finished with the corridor — and she would finish in a trice — Tomasa passed to the parlor.

The cleaning of this room required little more effort.

In the center of the room arises a dark bulk of pine, oval-shaped. On the black table is a lamp of white crockery, with a filthy tube and a cracked globe. They never lighted it. A half dozen chairs of black reed, with seats of plaited straw, and two arm-chairs of the same type, congregated, as if in conclave, to lament the solitude that always reigned in that room. A little mirror, oval-shaped like the table, with a frame as black as the chairs and the arm-chairs, occupies the middle of the opposite wall. To each side of the mirror there are various old portraits: a woman at the right, a man at the left. These are the father and mother of Camilo Irurtia who preside over the solitude and the neglect of that rich man's parlor — the salon of their millionaire son.

From the parlor the old woman passed Irurtia's office. This was the best furnished room in the

house. It was here that don Camilo always received his guests.

In the center, a wide table covered with documents, all in order — some held down by glass balls or by polished *guarataros*. A very massive desk, covered with morocco leather or faded oil-cloth, rears its documentary stomach before the comfortable swivel-chair of the lanky, heavy-jawed Camilo Irurtia, king of house speculators.

To the right of the writing-desk, a small cedar wardrobe, filled not with clothes but with papers; to the left, two old leather chairs, the costliest possessions of the household, acquired at the pawnshop counter, and three black chairs of plaited straw, like those of the parlor. Nailed to the wall near the cedar wardrobe, a brightly-colored calendar that had been received as a Christmas present from the greengrocer.

After the office, and communicating with it by an inner door, the money-lender's bedroom.

This place was provided with a yellowish, frayed cot — a cot that had been left with Irurtia years before as collateral. In one of the corners the chaste couch of Irurtia yawned with boredom; it was covered by a bright quilt, a bedspread of many-colored patches purchased at a few *céntimos* and pieced together, by the labor and art of Tomasa, into a coverlet. At the head of the bed, a round lamp-stand in the style of the Napoleonic empire, which clashed with the color, and, if that were possible, with the style and epoch of the narrow bed; but this clash was not really possible, for the couch had no color, nor had it ever possessed any style; it

belónged to the era in which two vertical boards screwed to two horizontal planks were called a bed.

The wash-stand consisted of a tin basin upon an iron tripod that barely managed to hold together; above the stand, at about the height of one's eyes, hung a *peseta* looking-glass from which most of the quicksilver had been worn away.

The famous mahogany cabinet, the pride and heritage of Camilo, occupied a great deal of room; and skilfully hiding behind a brown woolen curtain, a huge mass almost embeds itself into the wall: this is the iron safe.

Tomasa took very little pains to tidy this last piece of furniture. Irurtia had prohibited her from touching it even with her feather-duster, and from drawing the curtain aside even in her thoughts.

Tomasa was a submissive soul, well accustomed to wearing the yoke of don Camilo and it cost her not the slightest effort to obey. For her that iron safe did not exist. For her that iron safe was like the altar of another religion — don Camilo's religion — which she knew nothing about. She was content to respect the altar through love of the worshipper and through force of habit.

When there was nothing left to sweep away or to dust off, Tomasa, taking up a little basket, would go off on her errands.

Daily, Irurtia would wait for the old woman to return from the shops so that he might go out on his affairs. The house could not be left alone. And while Camilo was out, old Tomasa would do the washing and prepare lunch — a vegetarian lunch, a meal for herbivorous creatures. Then she would take the afternoon nap.

Not Irurtia, however. Irurtia, during the hot, muggy hours, was habituated to remaining in his office, writing or looking over notes, contracts, securities — every sort of document; or consulting and reducing to the lowest possible figure the costs of the houses that were to be repaired; or making sure that the cement dealer, the tile dealer or the paint man hadn't charged him more the last time than time before last; or figuring how much he could increase the sales price of a house that had cost him so much. The truth is that his digestion did not interfere with his post-prandial ruminations.

At times, in the solitude of these hours, he would take pleasure behind closed doors in counting, recounting, handling, gazing upon and sifting through his fingers double doubloons, silver pounds, *callaos,* louis d'or, *morocotas.* At other times, very quietly, without thinking or doing anything, he would feel his head sway and would doze off against his will, as a result of the silence and the heat. And the old woman, now up again, would drag her lame foot about the house, ironing clothes or darning.

Thus the house was never left deserted. One of the Cerberean guards was always on the watch. They had supper at seven. And shortly afterward, to bed.

Rising with the dawn, they retired with the hens. Camilo slept the light sleep of the mistrustful, ready to wake at the slightest brush of a fly's wing. On her cot of illness Tomasa spent night after night without sleep; and even when her eyes closed, her slumber was hardly sound. Cursed rheumatism!

IV

THE PERFUME OF THE TWO WOMEN

IRURTIA was still reading *El Noticiero* in the corridor that morning when somebody knocked at the door, using the iron knocker so that he should surely hear; for Irurtia's front door was always closed, as if to isolate the house from the neighborhood, from the city, from the world. Irurtia, as was his habit, ran to one of the shutters before deciding to open the door, ever on guard against what might happen — suspicious, afraid, fearing to admit a beggar, a swindler, or — who could tell! — a robber.

The caller was Berroteran, a master mason whom don Camilo employed for the caretaking and repair of his city property; a proper sort of fellow, as honest as the day, slow and patient. Irurtia trusted Berroteran as far as Irurtia could trust anybody.

The two men passed to the proprietor's office.

"Have they finished that house at la Pastora?" asked don Camilo, knowing beforehand that it could not yet be completed.

The mason's only reply was a smile, and taking out a sheet of paper he commenced to give an account of the most recent repairs effected there and of the material that was still needed: locks for three doors, two metres of zinc for the poultry-yard,

a grated cover for the sewer in the backyard, and so on.

"Between Monday, when you looked it over, and today, we have made excellent progress."

"Excellent progress and not yet finished?"

"We'll be through with it this week, don Camilo. Only a few finishing touches are needed and the final coats of paint."

"You're slow as a snail, master."

The mason smiled again.

A moment later he added:

"As tomorrow is Saturday, I'd like to know whether you can give me the money for the men's wages now, or whether I'll have to come back for it tomorrow."

"Come tomorrow," replied Irurtia.

"Concerning the house at Santa Rosalia," went on the mason, "I don't know your intentions. I haven't dared to order the tiles, because they've gone up four *reales* per hundred."

Irurtia jumped at the news.

"Four *reales?* The robbers! Don't buy a thing. I'd rather have the house come down."

Then, growing calmer, he added:

"Let's wait and see if the price comes down. Don't you think so, master?"

The mason, who knew his employer, agreed:

"Yes sir; we can wait."

Then cleverly he suggested to the proprietor that he be spared the trouble of returning next day to get the workingmen's weekly wages. His skill was all in vain. Irurtia pretended not to understand.

The mason left, resigned and even indifferent.

It was around nine in the morning. The usurer

began to don his street attire: a black suit with a frock coat, frayed by wear and by the scrubbing of the brush — the same eternal suit of ten years back. It was time to go out.

He considered just what he had to do, so that he might work with strict method, perform his tasks in a certain order and thus lose no time.

He would go first to the Public Registry to legalize a document; then he would look over two or three buildings that he was having repaired; later he would visit the Bank of Venezuela and the Caracas Bank; finally, around half-past eleven or twelve, he would go to the corner of San Francisco street, the rendezvous of all the brokers in Caracas, an open-air exchange where, beneath the beautiful, tufted, venerable silk-cotton tree, with its centenary, legendary atmosphere, business and transactions of every sort took place. There he would be told by brokers and his agents of loans to be made with excellent collateral. There he would purchase or sell such and such securities, although Irurtia preferred to deal in solid securities of almost immutable character — stocks with an absolutely certain income, instead of in insecure speculation.

Don Camilo Irurtia had already decked himself out for the morning; he had already donned his sempiternal silk hat, had seized his sempiternal ebony stick, when there came the sound of the knocker on the street door.

"A most importune call, confound it!" he grumbled between his teeth.

The knocker sounded once more.

Irurtia, in high dudgeon, walked over to the

shutter without removing his hat, turned the catch and cast a glance in the direction of the door.

Two women were standing outside. Although he was looking straight at them, Camilo, through force of habit, asked:

"Who is it?"

And the women, likewise through force of habit, replied, through the mouth of the younger:

"Peaceful folk."

Camilo went to the door. The two women entered, and with them entered a whiff of *Coeur de Jeanette* perfume. The proprietor, removing his hat, introduced them into his office.

One of the women was blonde, tall, svelte: she was perhaps eighteen years old. The other, shorter, of dark complexion, black hair and dull-lustred skin and brown, dreamy eyes, was about thirty-six.

The younger of the two wore a tailor-made navy blue jacket and a white and blue striped skirt. Her shoes were of russet leather, her hat of white felt adorned with a heron feather from Apure or Caura; her parasol was likewise snow-colored.

The brunette wore a suit of gray gabardine with belt, sleeves and collar of mauve silk. Her hat was black, as were her shoes and parasol.

The elder of the two women was the first to speak.

"It seems that you were about to go out. If we are inconveniencing you . . ."

"In fact," interrupted don Camilo, somewhat bruskly, "I *was* just about to go out. But there's no hurry."

And, like a man who came directly to the point, he asked:

"And how may I be of service to you?"

"We have come," continued the woman in gray, "to see whether you would care to buy from us a house — the house in which we live."

"My dear lady, I don't buy houses."

"Ah! We were informed . . ."

"You were misinformed."

The younger of the two broke in forcefully at this point:

"Everybody knows that your business is renovating houses."

"But renovating is not purchasing."

That Irurtia was a half-wild, untamed demon.

Both women looked at him without the slightest indication of sympathy.

Lanky, skinny, little bellied; his wrinkly skin seemed to cover only bones. He had long legs, long arms, a long face and a long nose. He was short only in words, and, as rumor had it, in giving. He was short, too, in his attire, for his frock-coat barely reached to his upper thighs, and his trousers, more wrinkled than an accordion, scarcely came to his ankles, as if Irurtia were forever ready to jump over a puddle. He was gray-eyed and gray-haired; his clear, darting little eyes and the whitish wisps of his mustache accentuated his peaked face that had something of the burglar about it, imparting to Irurtia's countenance the aspect of a creature half feline and half rodent. His face and his hands were hairy; here and there little islands of patches where the hair had been scraped off — as if by one shaving himself in haste or in the dark — floated about in his hollow cheeks and his bony jaws. He was as lanky as Don Quijote, and even grayer.

Yes; this man was repugnant to both women. The brusk language he used did not change the impression given by the sight of him; quite to the contrary. They looked at him and heard him in amazement. So this was the famous Irurtia, king of the house speculators!

"I believe, my dear ladies, that there is some misunderstanding," he said, replying to the blonde.

"So do I," said the girl.

But the other intervened, and the untamed beast grew gentler.

The women continued to observe him with the utmost curiosity. How ugly he was!

His thin, high neck, within the celluloid collar that was low and much too wide, made this miserly creature look repulsive and grotesque to the women. His Adam's apple rose and fell in his hairy throat. His cravat, a black and extremely short strip of cloth, allowed the shining head of a huge copper collar button to be seen. The grayish hair of his mustache against his pointed snout, and those darting, restless money-lender's eyes, when his face grew animated with conversation, heightened his resemblance to a rat.

Both women felt an indefinable uneasiness in the presence of the miser; not the fear which is inspired by a powerful animal — a bear, a bull, a lion — but that instinctive repulsion and repugnance which are aroused by a toad, a spider, a bat, or the whitish, gelatinous jelly-fish that one accidentally steps upon with the naked foot, upon the beach.

Both were eager to cut the interview short.

The younger one — the blonde — had already

expressed herself rudely, and was on the point of leaving, disposed to halt the talk and the business then and there. The brunette, more gentle in voice and in presence, spoke then anew, asking:

"It seems, then, that you wouldn't care to buy our house?"

"No, madam."

"Nor exchange it for a smaller one, giving us the difference in money? Our house is an ancient mansion of the colonial days — immense, comfortable, with plenty of flowers in the *patios,* a magnificent garden in the yard. It's well constructed and durable, with thick walls of masonry. The earthquake of 1812 didn't displace a single stone. It wasn't touched."

The antelope-like don Camilo began to bite at the nails of his left hand, his eyes fixed upon the woman who was addressing him, and then, in an instant, replied:

"I'd have to see it."

It was agreed that Irurtia should come to see it on the afternoon of the following day, at four, and then give his answer.

Both women left.

The dingy place continued to exhale an aroma of feminine elegance.

Irurtia remained standing, still gnawing his nails. This biting of his nails was in him an unmistakable sign of nervousness and preoccupation.

A moment later, taking his hat and his ebony cane, the meditative fellow hastened out into the street.

The ramshackle cottage still exhaled the odor of woman.

V

THE AGUALONGAS

HAVING concluded their visit to Irurtia, both women, before returning home, wished to take advantage of the morning by making a tour of the fashion shops. It was the younger, the blonde, who made the proposal, and the brunette agreed, though unwillingly.

"But we aren't going to buy anything, Olga," she said.

"That makes no difference, godmother," replied Olga. "We'll see what they're offering, and besides, we'll see people. It'll help spend a pleasant time."

When they were already half way to the shops they agreed to postpone their visit and turned homeward. The thoughts of both women were fluttering, like bluebirds around an orange-tree with ripe, forbidden fruit, about the hawk-like Irurtia and his ounces of gold. The younger was pessimistic as to the outcome. Irurtia seemed intractable and his money inaccessible. The brunette — the godmother — though perhaps no more hopeful than the other, repeated several times, as if to temper the discouragement of her goddaughter:

"Let's wait till tomorrow. Perhaps the house will attract him more than we do."

Approaching the door to their home they divined,

rather than saw, behind the curtains of one of the windows, four eyes peering at them.

Two women were awaiting, in fact, the return of the other two. And from the window came an anxious inquiring voice:

"How much? And when?"

With nothing more than a smile toward the curtain as a reply, the godmother and her goddaughter walked forward into the outer vestibule and reached a spacious room furnished with antique pieces. The women who had been waiting behind the curtain remained seated on the window seats.

Those two women at the window were Eufemia and Alcira Agualonga, the sisters of Olga's godmother Rosaura, and aunts to Olga. Eufemia, Alcira, Rosaura and niece Olga lived in the manorial structure which the latter two had just entered.

Rosaura, the youngest of the three Agualonga sisters, was between thirty-six and thirty-seven; Alcira was about forty-two and Eufemia, fifty. Between Alcira and Eufemia had come Olga's mother — now dead — and a man who had died a tragic death from a shot during a hunting party. Between Alcira and Rosaura, came the never sufficiently estimated General Chicharra.

So, leaving out of account the wife of the celebrated general, it might be said that these three old maids — Eufemia, Alcira and Rosaura — were the only representatives of the formerly numerous and wealthy Agualonga family.

Eufemia, the oldest — tall, thin, bony, pale and sickly, was so bloodless that she looked as if made of porcelain. Two purple rings surrounded her dark

eyes. Her nose resembled a reaping-hook. Her hair was of a bluish white — ash color.

Alcira was physically insignificant. Of medium stature and with a tendency to corpulency; her figure somewhat barrel-shaped, her hair dark, with here and there a silver streak. Only her eyes shone with the unquenched fires of youth — the eyes of a maid of twenty.

Rosaura, like Alcira of medium build, had, also like Alcira, a pair of heavenly black eyes; but Rosaura's glance was filled with a soft glow and her very long eyelashes and her half-closed eyelids imparted to her a melancholy appearance. Her skin, of dull lustre, was of amber hue. Her nose, delicate; her lips, rather full; her bust, ample; her arms, plump. In her left cheek, near the corner of her lips there was a pretty little oval-shaped mole. Her hips were gracefully curved. She was, with her thirty-six years, an appetizing woman, with lips and breasts that still held temptation for man's caresses. She was in the ripeness of her autumn. Excellent fruit for a gourmand!

The three sisters — ingenuous and unknowing as they were — never could understand the evolution toward democracy of that society in which they lived. They continued ever to believe themselves, socially, the best of the best — worthy, because of their ancestors, of representing a super-caste. Simple, deluded souls, they were filled with a feudal pride and the kindness of a Sister of Charity.

The first Agualongas, the founders of the family, came from Burgos and established themselves in Costa-Firme during the seventeenth century

These primitive Agualongas grew rapidly wealthy by sending pearls from Cubaga and Margarita to Spain; or rather, to London via Spain, since the Colony, during the peninsular régime, could trade only with the mother country. The family later acquired its greatest wealth in speculations with the Guipuzcoan Company, which for a good many years had a monopoly of the trade between Venezuela and the mother country.

At the time of the first attempts toward independence, in 1789 — the work of the patriots Gual and Espana — and later, in 1806 and 1808, when General Miranda disembarked, proclaiming war, the Agualongas held aloof from these revolutionary outbreaks, which were drowned in blood by the Spanish government; but scarcely had the definitive hour of independence struck, when Caracas deposed Captain General Emperam on the 19th of April, 1810, and from that day onward began to govern itself, thus providing Spanish America with an example which it was not slow in following, driven onward by the same reasons as had actuated Caracas — whereupon the Agualongas, like a large number of Venezuelan families, were split into two factions: the one side was for the Republic — they were patriots; the others, for Spain — they were royalists. The first followed Miranda in the beginning, and later, Bolívar; the second, Monteverde and Boves, and afterward, Morillo.

The Agualongas suffered the fate of the rest of Venezuela, where the war was fought more fiercely and longer than in any other country of South America.

The Agualonga patriots that fell into Spanish hands were shot by Rosete, Zuazola, Morales, Boves, Morilla; the Agualonga royalists that fell into the hands of the patriots were shot by the Liberator and his chief lieutenants of 1813 to 1817: José Feliz Ribas, Arismendi, Mariño, Bermúdez, Piar. It was the most violent epoch of the war to the death.

The Spanish *juntos de secuestro* ruined the Republican Agualongas; the confiscations of the Republic ruined the royalist Agualongas.

By the time the revolution had come to an end in 1824, twenty Agualongas had disappeared in the whirlwind of war; of all that numerous family there remained but a single man and two sisters: all three patriots.

The Republic, though in a ruinous condition, indemnified them as best it could: it presented two estates to the man, as a reward for his services and by way of payment overdue of military damages; it did even more: it restored to the two women and the commandant several urban and rural holdings, which had been declared national property because they had belonged to the royalist branch of the Agualonga family and which, by reversion, came back to the heirs and survivors of the family.

Of these two women, one married, and the other died an old maid, at a very advanced age. The latter was named doña Hipólita, and was one of the family's highly celebrated figures.

Commandant Agualonga was the grandfather of Eufemia, Alcira, and Rosaura.

Under the favor of the first president of the Republic, General Páez, the commandant, after the

war of Emancipation was over, made a considerable fortune by exporting from the Plains of the East young bulls, mules and horses to Trinidad, Jamaica, Barbada, Saint-Thomas and other points of the West Indies.

"The horse and the bull," he used to say, "were our only allies during the Revolution; the horse carried us across our deserts, and the bull fed us in our poverty. To this very day, with all the sources of our national prosperity parched by the war, and the whole country in ruins, what remains to us? Mules, horses, bulls, and the Plain that rears them."

Commandant Agualonga's children, heirs to his name — some of them imbeciles — set out to squander their patrimony in ostentatious festivities, trips to Europe, revolts against the successors of Páez, and in seeking honors for the family in Spain. Doña Hipólita, a dyed-in-the-wool patriot, despised them so much that she called them the Agua-sucias.[5]

Lacking that practical, commercial spirit of the seventeenth-century Agualongas, and lacking likewise the heroic talents of the Agualongas of the Bolivian epic, the sons of the Commandant — those whom aunt Hipólita had dubbed the Agua-sucias — incapable of making a fortune as their peninsular forbears had done, were just as incapable of preserving their heritage; and not being able, like their Caracas parents, to shine with their own light in the political tempests, they sought the reflected light of

[5] Agualonga means, literally, long-water. Agua-sucia, filthy water.

others and spent their lives soliciting in the Archives of Spain heraldic glory that they could not find.

Proud that their name should figure in the annals of the Republic, they hoped, like other unhappy souls attacked by the same softening of the brain, that their name had also figured in the annals of Spanish history. They wished to be dukes, counts, marquises and barons; and in reality they were only poor devils.

The glory of their family consisted in having sacrificed twenty lives and a fortune for the independence of the country. It seemed little to them. Ignorant of the fact that the majority of Europe's great names did not possess so clear an origin, the degenerate Agualongas sighed for a strip of Castilian parchment. They would have considered themselves happy if they could have found, for example, a baronial coronet on the brow of some ancestor, whom some monarch of Castile, or at least a favorite of the monarch, had formerly crowned with an authentic royal horn, or a simple horn of the palace.[6]

Naturally they did not find what they deserved to find. The first Agualongas were hard-working, honest farmers of Burgos. Weary of laboring those picturesque and fertile meadows of Arlanza for others — of humiliating their own misery beneath the harmonious arches of that opulent Cathedral — of treading those neighboring mountain ranges that saw the Cid administering severe punishment to the Moors, without rising out of their poverty —

[6] The horn, in Romance tongues, is the symbol of the deception of a husband by his wife and her lovers, — of cuckoldry.

wearied of crossing from Valladolid to Burgos, from Burgos to Valladolid — two of the brothers, the youngest and cleverest, one day set out on the road to Seville, and there, encountering no difficulty, took passage for the Americas. Fortune, which is conquered by determination and will, smiled at them in Costa-Firme, whither they had turned their prow. Such was their history. How were the Agualongas of Caracas going to discover parchments relating to the Agualongas of Burgos?

Nevertheless they were able to procure a wily, rascally genealogist of Madrid, who, travelling to Burgos, wove a most fantastic genealogy of the Agualongas of Castile. According to that family tree, recently planted by the famished and scoundrelly diligence of the Madrid expert, the Agualongas of Burgos were "hidalgos of famous nobility, with a record of service to the King our sovereign, in these realms and in the Indies."

The result was an amusing complication. The Agualongas, according to the tale hatched by the Madrid lawyer, had been lords of Agua-Clara, a little village of Castile. How had Agua-Clara been transformed into Agualonga? Why, the matter was very simple. Agua-Clara (i.e. Clear-water) became, by error, Agua Larga (broad water); during the course of time Agua Larga changed to Agualuenga (long water) and Agualuenga became Agualonga.

The genealogical texture had its gaps, most certainly; but at the same time it looked genuine enough. With a little good will and nearsightedness one could easily believe in it. The Agualongas of Caracas believed in it down to the last letter,

with the best faith in the world. They had paid the genealogist dearly, and on the genealogy that had been, according to the lawyer, extracted from national, provincial and private archives, shone the red sealing-wax and black ink of various seals of Spain's public offices. This was enough. The Agualongas were bluebloods.

One of these blueblooded Agualongas — one of the Agua-sucias, as doña Hipólita called them — married in Madrid; another, in Caracas; another became a Carmelite nun; the rest died bachelors.

Among the children of the one who married in Caracas were Rosaura, Alcira, Eufemia, the wife of the incomparable General Chicharra, named Gertrudis, the man who had died tragically from a gunshot in a hunting party, and the mother of Olga. Married to a German merchant by the name of Emmerich, Olga's mother died the following year in childbirth.

So that, leaving Gertrudis, Chicharra's wife, out of the reckoning, Rosaura, Alcira and Eufemia were the sole heirs to the name.

In their poverty there remained to them only the memory of the family's opulence and traditions.

The three sisters, so distinct from one another physically, were morally much alike. This background of similarity, this moral family resemblance, were brought about by their kindness, their pride (which was tempered by a feeling of generous Christianity), and their inclination to sacrifice themselves upon the altars of another's interests.

The three were like mothers to Olga Emmerich,

their niece. "My three mothers," she would call them.

When, among their relations, any one fell sick or a funeral took place, the three would spend their last coin to *fulfil their obligations,* as their usual expression had it. And they grumbled not a little if they were not treated in like manner.

The three knew by heart the history of all the chief families in Caracas, and they would exchange these tales among themselves or with persons of their age and of their limited circle of old friends — a circle which death and absence was making daily narrower. But never did they insult anyone with malicious tales; never did they repeat old scandals to persons who did not know about them; for countless weaknesses they always found an excuse, and many a tale of infamy, as it crossed their lips, lost that despicable character of a stain that may never be eradicated.

Eufemia, the eldest, was the richest in anecdotes. At the mere sight of a person she would recall his father, his grandfather; through the history of a family she could reach that of the country, and through that of the country, that of the entire continent.

"You are the city archives," her sisters would jestingly tell her.

She revered whatever referred to her forbears and always kept alive the memory of aunt Hipólita, who had inculcated in her that respect for the past, that cult of certain persons of their own family and of the resounding epochs of the native soil.

That aunt Hipólta was an old chatterbox, full of

enthusiasm, and a fiery patriot. She had been born together with the century, in 1800, and had died well along in years, but sound of sense and clear in memory, in 1876. Neither Alcira nor Rosaura remembered her. Rosaura was six years old when their aunt died; Alcira was about ten or twelve. On the other hand, Eufemia was at that time a woman of sweet and twenty.

Eufemia, therefore, often took pleasure in relating to her sisters anecdotes about the old woman. She would tell them how aunt Hipólita, a contemporary of the war of Emancipation, had lived through tragic hours; how she knew the famous men of the day; how she was present at the birth of the Republic and how illustrious survivors of the Bolivian epic were fond of visiting her and recalling old times — vistors like José Antonio Páez, Carlos Soublette, Santiago Mariño, José Feliz Blanco, José Tadeo Monagas, Rafael Urdaneta, Bartolomé Salom.

"And it wasn't only the old men," Eufemia would tell her sisters, "that came to evoke the memory of the past in aunt Hipólita's company. Many of the young men would be frequent visitors, coming to hear details about the deeds and personalities of the revolution. Rafael María Baralt and Felipe Larrazábal were among this number. Conversing with both these gentlemen one afternoon, aunt Hipólita expressed the opinion that the history of Venezuela, outside of Venezuela, was yet to be written, and she recalled some of the many Venezuelans who, from the United States to Chile and the Argentine, filled all America with their name, their bravery, their

heroism and their disinterested service in the cause of their own country's liberty and the liberty of other nations.

"'I knew Miranda,' the old woman would say, 'who was an official under Washington, and general in France; he designed the tri-colored banner that Bolívar carried triumphantly all over the continent — the banner that daring vessels of our fatherland carried to the very coasts of Spain, and under whose folds, you may be sure, South America attained its independence. I knew Mariano Montilla, who captured the plaza of Cartagena in New Granada, and who served with the Mexican patriots; I knew Sucre, the hero of Ayacucho — I knew him as a very young man in Cumaná, in the year '14; Bartolomé Salom, who made the forts of Callao surrender in 1826, always used to come to the house in the company of Rafael Urdaneta, ex-president of Great Colombia, and Laurencio Silva, who triumphed at Junin. I knew also Jacinto Lara, who came filled with pride from Peru; Juancho Paz Castillo, who was colonel or general in Chile and sub-chief of the general staff in the Chilean-Argentine battle of Chacabuco; and the moody Matute, from Guarico, who with one of Bolívar's *La Guardia* companies — a hundred and seventy-three Venezuelans, sons of Apure and Guarico — entered the Argentine Republic, dethroned and expelled General Arenales, the governor of Salta, first aided and afterwards attacked and destroyed General La Madrid, governor of Tucumán, conquered all the gauchos and non-gauchos that opposed him, dominated the place at his own

sweet pleasure for a long time, raised Cain, until he was assassinated, together with the few Venezuelans that remained, by a certain Facundo Quiroga, as bad as Matute, or worse. I recall, as plainly as if they were right now before me, Pedro León Torrés, who died in Ecuador, I believe, after the battle of Bombaná, in which he was wounded; Manuel Valdés, who turned the tides of this very battle in favor of his country, by scaling the volcano of Pasto with his troops at the height of the strife over a ladder of bayonets. I remember very clearly, too, the grumbling Anzoátegui, who crossed the Andes with the Liberator and died in the Kingdom of New Granada as a result of wounds received at Boyacá, when Bolívar was conquering that kingdom. As to Juan José Flores, of Puerto Cabello, who was president of Ecuador, I didn't make his acquaintance until long after the war was over, as he passed through Caracas: General Carlos Soublette brought him to the house. I also knew a Venezuelan, a Spanish servant here, who afterward tried to be the Liberator of Cuba. His name was López — Narciso López. He died on the gallows.' "

Alcira and Rosaura found aunt Hipólita inexhaustible.

"Inexhaustible," replied Eufemia.

And she would recall another episode or evoke some other memory. It was not without a certain emotion that Eufemia related to her sisters and her relatives some of the recollections of the old woman.

When anyone in the city needed one of those dates that escape the historian but are preserved by

tradition, he was directed to Eufemia. She would inform the inquirer that José Feliz Ribas and Carlos Soublette had blue eyes; she even told them just how tall the gigantic figure of José Francisco Bermúdez was — that the poet Vicente Salias and the composer Landaeta, authors of the national hymn, both died on the scaffold in the year 1814, and that in the year 1814 there remained but a single student in the Caracas Seminary, because all the others had died in the war.

Eufemia, then, was an almost cloistered old woman who lived in the memory of her family and her fatherland more than in the tragic reality of every-day life.

As she recalled aunt Hipólita she became as inexhaustible as aunt Hipólita herself, averred her sisters, laughing. But Alcira and Rosaura felt for their older sister not only affection, but respect.

Her authority was accepted without question. It was she, who, tearing a piece out of her own heart, had decided that the old family mansion should be offered to Irurtia, so that Olga might be married decently, "like a princess."

When Olga and Rosaura entered that morning into the large room where Alcira and Eufemia were awaiting them, the latter, despite the pessimism portrayed upon the faces of the arrivals, repeated, with a pale trace of a smile, the question she had asked from the window:

"How much? And when?"

Then, before Rosaura could reply, Olga began to relate their meeting with Irurtia.

"Don't imagine that this don Camilo Irurtia,

king of the house speculators, is an agreeable personage. . . . A pig, a hairy old lizard. . . . I don't think we can do any business with him unless we let him have the whole place for four *pesetas*. . . ."

VI

A RARE TYPE OF NIECE

IT was about three in the afternoon. Rosaura, Alcira and Eufemia, seated in the corridor, in the shade of a thick, fragrant honeysuckle vine, around a yellow rattan table, were sewing a dress for their niece, Olga. Without removing their eyes or their needles from their sewing, they discussed the impression that the house would make upon Irurtia. The usurer was expected at any moment.

Olga Emmerich, a few feet away, leaning back in her comfortable chair with her legs spread out, took no part in the conversation of her aunts. She was immersed in a novel by Georges Ohnet.

Olga had given her opinion of the matter on the previous day, and she did not budge a hair's breadth from it. A hundred times since the evening before she had repeated it:

"That old bloodsucker will buy nothing."

This was why her aunts' conversation did not interest her.

Rosaura, although little more credulous than Olga, was trying, like the generous soul she was, to infuse spirit into the others, and the result was that she infused it into herself as well.

"Let us hope," she kept repeating, "that the house will attract him more than our persons did."

Eufemia, pale, with rings under her eyes, sickly, her hair ashen gray and her face all fretted with wrinkles, answered Rosaura's forced optimism with her own sincere optimism:

"I really believe that Irurtia will buy, or that he'll agree to exchange it for some smaller house . . ."

"He certainly will agree to that," interrupted Alcira, smiling. "Change it for a smaller house? Of course he'll consent. Even I, who am surely no such miser as Irurtia, would gladly do business of that sort."

"For the Lord's sake, don't be so silly," broke in Eufemia, explaining her thought. "I say that he'll exchange it for a smaller house, giving us a certain amount of money in addition. Enough for poor Olga to get a decent trousseau with, so that we may give her a wedding fit for a princess."

The three women at the same time turned their eyes toward their niece, looking for a smile or a glance of affectionate agreement. Olga, engrossed in her novel, continued to read. Nevertheless, she had heard very distinctly all that Eufemia had said, and out of the corner of her eyes she looked at the maternal heads of her aunts, directed toward her.

Alcira began to speak :

"Well, I think that Irurtia . . ."

But she was unable to finish. A harsh, reproving cry interrupted her words.

"Alcira, take care! You're letting the cloth drag on the ground!"

It was Olga Emmerich, in a rage, because one fold of the material had slipped to the earth.

The three women agreed that Olga was right.

What carelessness! And they continued to sew with diligent watchfulness.

All at once Rosaura, as if recalling an important detail that had slipped her mind, asked:

"What shall we serve to Irurtia?"

"Really," observed Alcira, "what shall we serve him?"

"How about a cup of tea?" asked Eufemia.

"No," replied Alcira. "It's too early for tea. Tea, at four?"

"A sangaree,[7] then?" queried Rosaura. "Beer?"

The problem was beyond solution. They resolved to consult Olga. The latter jumped to her feet at the first word addressed to her; ill-humoredly she threw her book upon the rocker and in the ugliest mood imaginable she replied:

"I've been listening to your nonsensical talk for the past quarter of an hour. You're a flock of silly geese; common old know-nothings that put one to shame. The idea of offering refreshment to Irurtia! Where did you ever get such a ridiculous idea? You belong to the past century. You don't go ahead; you never learn."

The three women looked at one another without understanding very well either what was said or what could be the reason for this outbreak of reproof; each desired to cast upon the other two all blame for the blunder that they did not understand.

Olga continued, like an unending downpour:

"What should we offer Irurtia, and why? He's an old usurer who's coming on his business — a thief

[7] *Sangría* (literally, a bleeding). Wine, and sometimes brandy, sweetened and spiced.

coming to rob us. And we must run before him and offer our blood to the bloodsucker — our glass of sherry to the rascal. Here, my fine sir hairy lizard, have a nice little cake. Here's the tea, señor Irurtia. What grace! What tact! Only you silly women could think of such absurdities."

Eufemia, trying to assume a dignified mien and feigning a terrible air, replied:

"Why see, my child. To receive properly a person who comes to visit us, even though it be on business, places nobody in a ridiculous position, nor is it such bad form as you seem to imagine. Long before you came into the world we knew all about social etiquette."

Olga burst into artificial, mocking laughter.

"Social etiquette? Yes, the customs of the old, old, hoary days, when they drank sugared water at balls and when the most *chic* thing for couples to do was to go to the Portachuelo and eat *pan-de-horno*."

"Better times those were," replied Eufemia, "than these days of insolence and ill-breeding."

Alcira and Rosaura remained gravely silent.

As Olga began anew her attack upon all three, Alcira exclaimed in tones that tried to be threatening:

"Olga!"

Rosaura, not to be outdone, and in order not to be accused afterward by her two sisters of having with her silence sided with their niece, desiring to bring about peace, exclaimed like Alcira, but in a less imperious vioce:

"Olga!"

The most severe of the three without a doubt,

Eufemia, as white as a sheet, spoke sententiously and reticently:

"Bring up crows and they'll peck out your eyes."

Olga roared with fury:

"Crows, you say? So I'm a crow, am I? So you people have brought up a crow who now pecks your eyes out! Poor little victims! Fortunately I'll soon be married. Fortunately the crow will take to its wings and fly away from her three mothers. Her three mothers will watch her departure not with hollow eyes, but with dry ones."

And assuming a dramatic pose, as she stalked into the rooms, she exclaimed:

"Unhappy I, who have never known a mother!"

The three women exchanged glances anew. Tears sprang to Rosaura's eyes. Alcira chided Eufemia:

"You are very harsh with Olga. You say altogether too bitter things to her."

The poor old woman contritely agreed.

Rosaura, arising, followed her niece, who had thrown herself into bed. When Olga heard the approaching footsteps she covered her face with her hands, as if bowed down by a grievous burden. A few moments later Alcira came in and sat down, like Rosaura, at the edge of the bed. The aunts tried to console Olga. The niece, mute, hurt, scornful, would not uncover her face. At last Rosaura said to her:

"Wait, my dear little daughter. I'll go and call Eufemia to make up with you.

And she went out after her.

"No, I'll not go," Eufemia began.

A few seconds later, bringing her pale, old face

close to the youthful, fair cheek of Olga, she was imploring the girl in a voice choked with tears.

"Forgive me, my angel, the harsh words I spoke to you. You know that you're the joy of our household. We love you so much!"

Nor did the old woman exaggerate. Olga was the idol — and the tyrant — of those three old maids.

An orphan from the cradle, she had never known any other maternal affection than theirs. These women had dedicated themselves to the infant; for eighteen years they had vied with one another in showing her tenderness, in pampering her, serving her, loving her.

Rosaura, the youngest of the Agualongas, was scarcely Olga's present age — eighteen springs — when Olga came into the world. Emmerich's wife preferred Rosaura to all her sisters because of the young girl's gentle, loving, even, kind nature, and even before Olga was born, she promised that Rosaura would be the godmother of the coming child. After Olga's mother had died, the German Emmerich, as well as the Agualongas, respected the departed woman's wishes, and Rosaura was the godmother of the new-born child. In the very bloom of her life, cradled in illusions, beautiful, courted by many, this self-sacrificing woman not only did not shirk her duties, or what she looked upon as her godmotherly duties in respect to the little orphan, but she served the girl as mother and nurse at first, and later, as mother, governess and teacher.

How many times had she given up attending a ball, though she was already dressed to go, because

Olga had burst into tears and would fall asleep only in her godmother's arms. In the course of time Rosaura taught her how to read and gave her the first lessons in singing. When Olga began to go to school, Rosaura would take her there every morning and fetch her home every afternoon. She would never trust to the mercenary attentions of a servant. Olga's servant was Rosaura. Afterward, when Olga made her début, Rosaura was her guide, her lady-in-waiting, her mentor; and when Olga, at the age of fourteen, had her first sweetheart, it was Rosaura who like a faithful watchdog vigilantly guarded over the calf-and-puppy love. But she had to disguise her surveillance and even pretend blindness; her niece would grow exasperated and fume to feel those Argus eyes about her; she knew how to conduct herself — she desired full freedom. Alcira and Eufemia would say to Rosaura:

"Give her a little liberty. You run chances of losing her affection." And poor Rosaura, jealous and loving, would at the cost of much suffering relax her vigilance, and would confess privately to her sisters, almost weeping:

"You are right. I myself feel that my solicitude rouses her anger. I must close my eyes. I am afraid I'll lose her affection."

But the greatest sacrifice Rosaura placed upon the altars of this affection was not that of her youth, but that of her destiny. A rich, handsome young man whom she loved and whom she was ready to marry, refused to consent to the marriage if Rosaura brought Olga with her.

"She can live with Eufemia and Alcira," he had

said. "You'll see her daily, or almost every day. Neither she nor you will lose by it. But have her in our home? Before long we'll have our own children and then it would be a regular kennel. I myself, perhaps, blinded by paternal love, may become unjust toward Olga. I'll offend her by showing preference for our own children. So for her own sake, make up your mind to separate from your godchild; make up your mind to settle down in your own home, to fulfil your destiny upon earth, to be happy."

Deaf to all reason, and renouncing her happiness, Rosaura, as between marriage and Olga, finally chose Olga.

In reality it was not only Rosaura who burned her existence, like a grain of myrrh, before the blonde orphan. Alcira and Eufemia both did almost the same. Their affection for the child was practically their whole life. From her cradle Olga had been the center of all the feelings of that household. Her whim was law — *the* law. The soul of these spinsters found an outlet for their maternal instinct, which is latent in every woman, in the love of their niece — of that frail, blonde, pretty, helpless little creature, who had no protection or fortune other than they could give her, and who had no other father, mother, sister or brother than they.

The Agualongas were poor, and concealed their penury at times with grace, at others with extreme stratagem and common wiles.

The house garden helped them to live and to pay off a debt for Olga — the only thing she had inherited from the German, and payment of which

required many years. They made wreaths for burials; bouquets for banquets; fancy floral adornments for weddings. The religious women gave them orders for baskets of roses and bunches of lilies for guardian saints and holy images on religious feast days; and whoever went on a visit to the cemetery first came to the Agualonga house for a supply of flowers.

When Olga had completed her fourteenth or fifteenth year and began to go out into the world, she was filled with shame to think that her aunts made a living from such a business, and, out of deference to Olga, the business was given up.

The modest income of the Agualongas was thus reduced to the tiny pension that the government granted them as unmarried nieces of the illustrious patriot.

Olga found this more *chic*. And in deference to Olga's *chic*, the Agualongas reduced their personal expenditures still more. On the other hand, Olga, as far as was possible, had more than enough of everything she cared for, especially superfluous things.

That debt of another which for years and years, by dint of economy, the Agualongas had been paying, constituted a silent and protracted act of heroism that neither they nor anybody else were ever able to appreciate.

The German Emmerich — an inveterate drunkard — died of cirrhosis, a year after his wife. The few interests that he left to Olga were in a hopeless tangle. Emmerich's debts mounted higher than his assets. The lawyer who was consulted by the

Agualongas explained the state of affairs very clearly:

"It would be better for you to renounce this inheritance. Let the creditors settle it among themselves as best they can."

The Agualongas, however, did not choose to follow his advice. As the liabilities were far in excess of the assets, the Agualongas were compelled to sell, through the lawyer, everything that had been left by the drunkard of a German; and afterward, for years and years, they had to keep on laying aside a fund. That sum, though not in itself very large, was great enough to these poor women. They labored unremittingly, even going so far as to deny themselves the most necessary articles; but at last they succeeded in paying off the entire debt. Then they breathed with relief, and even told to their relatives the outcome of that mute, intimate tragedy which had stretched over so many years. At last they had finished payment!

The recompense, the reward for that sacrifice consisted in expressions like the following from some of their friends, made in the very presence of the three sisters:

"To accept such a legacy under such conditions was an act of haste."

"It was not hasty at all; we thought it over and discussed it fully," said Rosaura.

"Then it was sheer folly."

"It was not folly, for we did it in full realization of what it meant, and well informed by our lawyer," retorted Alcira.

"Then it was crazy."

"It was not crazy," countered Eufemia. "We wished that the name Olga was going to bear should be unsullied — an honorable name. In memory of our sister, and for the sake of our Olga, we did what we did. And we're not sorry for it, thank God."

The manorial house in which they lived, which was all that remained to them of their own heritage, was all they possessed. After repeated deliberations they resolved to sell it, so that they might marry off Olga in style; if they could not sell it, at least to exchange it, according to Eufemia's plan, which had been ratified by the rest, for a smaller house, receiving something in compensation for the difference. This was the most practical way out of the difficulty. Thus they would be able to marry Olga "decently," as Eufemia put it, and the three women, already on the way to old age, would not be left to end their days in the street, under the starry heavens.

It was with grief that they were to part with that shady, musty, colonial, spacious, delightful house, surrounded by flowers and trees, with high, airy, light rooms, through whose windows was wafted the perfume of magnolias, lilies, roses, geraniums, night-blooming cereus, jessamine, heliotrope, petunias; they were to leave that pond where they bathed at dawn, in a delicious, odorous water white with the jessamine; those corridors into which the sun filtered through fragrant honeysuckle and bluebells; those patios; that garden where the birds came to peck at the ripe golden guava fruit, where the pomegranate-tree with its fruit of the half-open lips and the pink

little teeth smiled to the sky, where limes and grapefruit swelled like a nurse's breast, where brown, sweet-smelling medlar-trees ripened in the sun and the fruit of the avocado softened its oily pulp of vegetable butter.

It was with grief, then, that they were to leave the hereditary colonial mansion founded by their seventeenth-century forbears and miraculously ransomed, after the Revolution, by the Agualongas of the nineteenth century. Those walls, according to the plans of the sisters, had been meant to serve them as a haven of refuge in their old age; those walls preserved for the old maids a thousand recollections of their youth; those walls kept the secret of their ancestors; through those walls the sentimental sisters, amid their isolation, could understand one another in their union with the past.

But Olga had to be married "decently, like a princess." For Olga, and for her happiness, every sacrifice appeared microscopic, not worth a straw.

Alcira and Eufemia left their niece lying in the bed. Olga had deigned to pardon Eufemia without saying so, speaking to her in token of peace.

Alcira and Eufemia went back to the corridor to gather their sewing materials. Irurtia would be there at any moment. It was four. And the two were picking up muslin, thimbles and spools, when somebody knocked at the street door.

Olga, bounding up from bed, began to arrange her hair before the closet mirror.

Rosaura went out to open the door.

With his silk hat in his right hand, and his short, dark green frock coat, Irurtia appeared in the corridor.

Through the button-hole of his celluloid collar stuck the huge copper head of a huge collar-button.

VII

THE TIGER'S NOT SO UGLY AS HE'S PAINTED

THE Agualongas were in ecstasy. There were going to be able to celebrate Olga's marriage "decently"; they were to be enabled to marry her off in great style, "like a princess." Irurtia had agreed to exchange the ancient family dwelling for a smaller and more modest place, giving them a certain sum to make up the difference.

On the day following his first inspection of the house, Irurtia came with Berroteran, his trusted master mason, that phlegmatic, cunning Berroteran who answered the miser's arrogance with sweet smiles and who, according to the workingmen's words, "had sliced the old man's navel," — which is to say, had been clever enough to win the confidence of the mistrusting curmudgeon.

The mason had a ladder raised, and between him and Irurtia they examined the structure most conscientiously, from the parlor to the corral, from the foundations to the roof. Not a beam was left unnoted, not a transom overlooked, not a column unmeasured, not a stone uninspected. Irurtia together with Berroteran climbed up the ladder, despite his fifty years, pointing out to the Agualongas, who watched him from below, certain defacements that he had discovered. From time to time the two men

furtively exchanged words or glances of connivance, which did not escape the Agualongas, causing them to conceive the most smiling hopes.

Foreseeing a highly profitable stroke of business, Irurtia admitted to them that the transaction was possible. After a thousand sly observations meant to diminish the value of the splendid colonial manor in the eyes of the joint owners he let fall these words:

"I have various houses that might suit your purpose. As for the sum to be added to even up the exchange, I imagine that we'll come to an understanding. I may suppose that you don't aspire to tear out my liver."

Tear out Irurtia's liver!

The wily don Camilo, after having exchanged a few words with the Agualongas, saw that these poor women would be a certain prey in his hands — doves in the talons of the hawk.

No sooner did Irurtia show his disposition to barter the house for another than the poor women shone with joy, in the belief that Irurtia was going to give them a place in which to dwell and a fortune with which to marry off Olga.

Having finished his visit of most minute inspection, after registering every detail of the structure, don Camilo returned the following afternoon to the Agualonga home. He wished to learn how much money, more or less, the women desired.

"If it's a large sum," he said, "I'll not be able to give it, and you'll have to look for another barterer. People think I'm a millionaire. They're mistaken. Why, at times I'm badly in want of one hundred

pesos. Nobody would ever think so; but that's the truth. What I own, I own in houses, and houses don't sweat gold nor can they be sold at just the moment when a man wants such and such an amount."

"We know that very well," commented Olga ironically.

"You know that. So much the better. Then you'll not ask pears from the elm-tree."

The Angualongas reassured him.

They aspired to no exorbitant sums. They merely desired a house that would be something more than a dingy, poorly-furnished, ill-smelling hut, where they might live in comfort, and a little bit of money that they might marry off Olga in decent style. That was all.

"Marry off Olga in decent style?" asked Irurtia. "What do you call marrying off Olga in decent style? How much do you require to marry off Olga in decent style?"

Olga was provoked, and replied caustically:

"Enough to marry her off in more sumptuous fashion than you'd employ for your own marriage."

Irurtia frowned.

The Agualongas noticed the bad effect produced by their niece's bluntness. As they were by nature kind, insinuating, flattering, and since their own interest was now added to their innate gentleness, they tried to efface the bad impression.

"Olga means," began Rosaura, "that we, with more money, would do things less well than you; that you, in similar circumstances, would need less money than we, because you know life better."

Irurtia smiled at the explanation, eyeing Rosaura fixedly. He was already opening his mouth to reply when Alcira, anxious to shift the conversation, remarked to Irurtia with pretended bruskness:

"You're a bachelor, don Camilo, if I'm not mistaken."

"Bachelor," answered Irurtia, somewhat taken aback.

"Ah! You didn't care to marry."

Once more Olga intruded with her malicious tongue:

"You would have made some woman so happy."

Irurtia was out of his element. A master of himself with eagle eyes in the matter of business, he felt himself floundering before these women when it came to talk to love and marriage; he stammered without being able to find the right and fitting reply.

Rosaura came anew to his assistance.

"Señor Irurtia has had no time to waste upon frivolities. His life has surely been one of arduous toil."

Eufemia added:

"That's true. And that is why God has protected him and granted him a fortune."

Irurtia barely heard Eufemia's words; but he beheld an open door in Rosaura's, and through that wide-open door he plunged:

"You are right," he exclaimed, turning to Rosaura, who inspired him with more confidence than the others. "You are right. My life has been one of arduous toil."

As all eyes and ears awaited him in wrapt attention, Irurtia began to tell the story of his life.

"Ever since I was a little boy I have done nothing but work hard. At the age of fifteen I entered a business house, as an employee without salary — almost as a servant. Later I got a place in a shop. There, at the end of a long time I was earning scarcely forty *bolívares* per month. It was very little; still, it was something. As I had an inclination for figures, and as that firm got the best of every living creature, they gave me a position as assistant book-keeper. When, two years later, the head-bookkeeper died, I took his place, although at a lower salary than my predecessor. I began to be looked upon as a personage in that business. Out of my savings more than once I loaned money to fellow employees. Some paid me back; others didn't. At last people even said that I practised usury. Since I could see no future ahead of me in the place, I left. Then I devoted my time to buying articles cheap and selling them dearer. A hammer, for example, would cost me a *peseta;* I'd have a handle fixed to it, find a buyer, and sell it for one and a half, or two. The profit was very small; but two *pesetas* here and three *pesetas* there amount to something, and if a fellow isn't a spendthrift, he can save them. Afterward, having acquired a bit more money, I dealt in jewelry; later still, in houses. I have spent my life, as you say, in hard work. From six in the morning to six at night I've always, almost always, been at hard work, ever since I was fifteen up to the present day, when I've just passed fifty. So how was I to have time to think of love affairs?"

And turning again to Rosaura, he repeated:

"You are right when you say that my life has been spent in hard toil."

It had never occurred to Irurtia to talk of himself, with the exception of one other time, when he had spoken with Tomasa. It caused him pleasure unutterable to have such distinguished ladies listen with interest and even gestures of admiration while he, without any adornments, told them the story of his sordid, heroic life as a person of prey.

He was flattered most of all when, after he had finished his recital, Eufemia said to him, in tones of genuine conviction:

"Señor Irurtia, you are a hero of labor."

And his feeling of pleasure rose even a point higher when Rosaura, in tones of the most sincere admiration, repeated:

"A hero of labor."

These words fell into the heart of the usurer like plentiful rain upon parched soil. They were like the approval of an entire existence; they effaced stains; they purified the scum and sublimated the money-lender to the heights of heroism. He, Irurtia, was a hero of labor.

Being a practical man, without any scruples, don Camilo never accepted formulas as payment, nor was he a prey to sentimentality, nor did words lead him to good or evil, nor did he ever have any aim other than his purely personal interests; but this approbation from the lips of such pure women, from persons representing the flower of society, redeemed Irurtia in his own eyes from all blame or stain. It was sanction itself.

Men, even the most knavish and despicable of them, cannot live without public esteem. Irurtia, despite his gold, did not merit it, nor had he ever

known it. There comes a moment in the lives of these men who lack nothing, when they feel the need of their fellow man's appreciation. Even more: persons whom public opinion considers most hopeless are wont to be most hungry for social consideration. And they are likewise the ones who are most grateful for it.

Irurtia had not come in quest of homage; but this revindication of his whole life, through women's lips, flattered him exceedingly. He felt, at that moment, just like a fish in the water — very much at ease; even more — completely happy.

When he left, he carried with him the most excellent impression of that family. The Agualongas seemed to him the most amiable women in the world. And Rosaura especially loomed large in his recollection, for she had twice come to his aid against the sarcasm and the caustic remarks of her niece.

He walked through the street all smiles, greeting his acquaintances with unwonted amiability.

Drawing near to his cottage he noticed Matamoro's nag tied to the window. It did not occur to him that the animal might be robbed, and he dashed into the narrow vestibule, shouting:

"Friend Matamoros, friend Matamoros: I know that you're here."

And before he had finished grasping Cirilo's hand he asked, talkatively, almost effusively:

"Do you declare Tomasa recovered? I hope so, for the sake of her health and your reputation."

"We do whatever we can, don Camilo; but an old case of neglected rheumatism doesn't disappear over night."

The brown-skinned mestee replied in the best of humor, flattered at bottom; but his thick eyebrows and his truculent aspect made him look, despite himself, as if he were about to roar.

Tomasa, who was present, lost heart and said, sighing:

"Matamoros means that there's no cure for this."

Matamoros protested emphatically. He had said no such thing. Now his eyes really clouded. His manner became formidable, and his look that of an enraged wolf. He, not have self-confidence? Never had such folly occurred to him.

Irurtia calmed Tomasa with honied words.

He even asked Matamoros whether it would do any good to send Tomasa to San Juan de los Morros or to Las Trincheras to take sulphur baths.

"But Tomasa hasn't syphilis," protested the native doctor, fearing that his prey would escape him.

Then he added, in tones of conviction:

"A little patience; I'll cure her."

The old woman had lost faith in Matamoros and in his mixtures and doses. No sooner had he left than she made a blunt confession to Cámilo:

"He's of the opinion that I'm better; but I don't believe it. Now he wants me to take injections of *guamacho*. He left the plant over there. But I'll take none of his remedies. That man, although he says the contrary, will not cure me."

Irurtia set about to convince her that Matamoros was the great genius of Medicine and that she, Tomasa, was almost well and as nimble on her feet as a ballet dancer.

And finally he promised that he would send her to Macuto or Maiquetía. The sea would complete her recovery. The sea was the most competent of doctors.

That night, at table, he kept on talking in an unending flow of words and in most optimistic strain; yet in reality he spoke absent-mindedly, with his thoughts elsewhere.

Already in bed, he put out the light and began to review in his mind the houses that he could offer to the Agualongas. "I prefer," he said to himself, "to give them a good house and very little money. If I give them too much money, I'll be forced to give them a ramshackle barn. They'd spend all the money on their niece, who isn't worth a straw. No. Let them spend as little as possible on that young harpy and rather let those worthy ladies enjoy a comfortable home in their old age."

He fell asleep later than usual.

He dreamed that a horrible demon was piercing him with a fork of five sharp prongs. That demon smiled with a malevolent, sardonic smile. Its face was the fair countenance of Olga. But an angel, fluttering its white wings, descends from the parting heavens, launches a thunderbolt at that demon or she-devil, burying her in the earth and crowns the victim with a green laurel branch. Irurtia felt the fresh leaves and the angel's hands upon his brow. This rescuing angel with the immaculate, snow-white wings had the blinking, dreamy eyes, the soft skin, the oval mole and the selfsame face of Rosaura.

The Agualongas, on their part, began to discuss the interview as soon as Irurtia left that afternoon.

They laughed till their sides hurt at the thought of don Camilo mounted on the ladder pointing out the places that needed repair.

"That old fellow," said Olga, "produced a horrible antipathy in me, with his little rats' eyes, his Adam's apple that bobs up and down, his copper collar-button, his greenish frock-coat and his thief's air."

"As for me," commented Rosaura, "the poor fellow gives me 'the creeps.'"

"He's a hard worker," said Eufemia.

Alcira, translating the composite thought of all with respect to Irurtia, expressed the opinion that he seemed less bad than his reputation, employing the popular saying:

"The tiger's not so ugly as he's painted."

Rosaura, standing behind Olga's chair, caressed the girl's cheeks with loving strokes, as if her niece were but a little child, considering it certain that Irurtia, although he had not uttered a word about it up to the present moment, would provide a veritable palace for the aunts and a tidy little sum for her goddaughter's wedding.

The three old maids placed all faith in the realization of the exchange. The three were filled with ecstasy at the thought that they could marry off Olga decently, "like a princess."

VIII

OLGA'S SACRIFICE

DURING the two weeks that followed, the Agualongas visited from ten to a dozen of Irurtia's houses. None of these pleased them. Some had this defect, some had that. Some were microscopic in size.

"We'd smother before getting into this place," they said.

The large houses, on the other hand, were ill-smelling places or repulsive altogether.

At the recollection of their beautiful mansion, drenched with light, with air, framed in flowers and trees, they complained of the diminutive rooms they were shown, and everywhere missed their shrubbery and fountains.

"Why, there are no bushes here, or fountains. Where is there room in this tiny yard for a pot of sweet-basil? And where can you hang a canary cage? A bird would die of gloom here."

Every house that Irurtia suggested to them was deficient: the spacious ones were pestilential; the small ones, stifling; the new ones, in bad taste; the old, uncomfortable.

During those two weeks they inspected entire sections of Caracas.

One afternoon they would go northward, toward la Pastora, crossing the Guanábano bridge over the Catuche river; the other, they would travel southward, toward el Paraíso, crossing the Guayre by the Dolores bridge; other afternoons they would journey beyond the Anauco, toward the extreme eastern section of the city.

"We prefer to live in the central part of the town," they finally told Irurtia.

"Very well," replied don Camilo. "We'll look for something near Catedral, las Mercedes, Santa Teresa or Alta-Gracia."

There wasn't a piece of property owned by Irurtia in the central parishes and rented at forty *pesos* per month that they did not examine.

"I haven't a building left to show you," said the owner, stroking his bony jaw. "The rest are either too large or too small for you."

"Yes you have, señor Irurtia, yes you have," they replied, with the confidence acquired during two weeks of tramping back and forth across the city of Caracas.

Benevolent and patient, don Camilo bit his nails, trying to think of a place.

"Maybe you'd like a little house on the plaza del Panteón. At any rate, you'll lose nothing by going out to see it. Tomorrow at four I'll come for you."

Never had Irurtia been so patient or kind. He himself was surprised at his attitude toward these persons. Not only did he yield to the feminine caprices that enmeshed the dealings, threatening to make the business interminable, but instead of send-

ing these customers to cast their eyes upon the property in company of Berroteran the mason, or of some employee, he accompanied them himself, every afternoon, knowing beforehand that he would waste one or two hours in listening to empty chatter. He was amazed that he could lose two hours daily and listen to foolish female gabble with the greatest of pleasure. And above all he was surprised that all day long he, Irurtia, a serious, practical business man — a man of long experience and proof against mischance, flattery and weakness, a man who believed only in God and Gold — should be waiting almost with anxiety for the time to fly so that four o'clock should come — the hour for him to go and call upon the Agualongas. It did not chafe him to waste his time in such company; on the contrary, he liked it very much. For this reason, and also in the hope of foisting some half-ruined house upon them, he began by showing them his worst properties. If, thanks to the Agualongas, he could rid himself of such shanties, all the better. And recollecting his thought of giving them a comfortable house and little money, he corrected himself: "I'll give them only a little money and the worst house I possibly can. For after all, I'm not the head or the protector of that family. What the deuce! Business is business. I'm no Sister of Charity, but a man with hair on his chest."

At the beginning of these inspection tours Olga, Rosaura and Alcira used to accompany the wealthy old miser.

But on the third and fourth day Olga did not care to give herself any further trouble in the matter.

From that day forward only Alcira and Rosaura made the daily rounds with Irurtia.

Eufemia, older and always in ill health, scarcely ever went out except to attend seven o'clock mass on Sundays, or to fulfil her duty toward her relatives, especially when there was some bereavement. Eufemia took her walks in the house garden. She would accept, she said, any house that her sisters should select. But few years on this earth remained to her. And her walking skeleton could be accommodated anywhere at all until the striking of the final hour.

It was Eufemia who, though she said nothing, felt most sad at leaving the old family mansion. It served her not only as a dwelling-place, but as a street, promenade, recreation spot, everything. She was intensely fond of the garden. She would spend the morning watering the flowers, as a pretext to warm her limbs in the early sun; afternoons, with all the domestic chores done, she would take the huge garden shears or the sharp cornhandle, and spend the time cutting an acacia branch, pruning a jessamine bush or lopping off shoots of a pink plant, or else enjoy grafting a rose bush, thrusting a vine-prop into the ground, or gathering for the saints, for Olga, for the parlor, for the dining-room, or even for the flower-market every Sunday — in constant fear lest she should be discovered by Olga — bunches of violets, twigs of nard and roses of snow, purple and gold.

One afternoon at table, after they had returned from their daily tour with Irurtia, Alcira began to tease Rosaura in regard to the miser:

"The old fellow," she said, "certainly likes to talk with you. At times he doesn't even answer my questions, he's so utterly taken up with you."

"I believe he's equally fond of everybody."

"Lord, Rosaura, don't be a silly goose. Every afternoon, for the past two weeks you've had that scarecrow of an Irurtia at your side, and while he talks to you he seems to be making love. Yet you say that he's equally fond of everybody."

"I give you my oath . . ."

"Don't swear. Unless I'm very much mistaken the old fellow's smitten. What a conquest!"

Olga's eyes suddenly flashed:

"So that's where we are, godmother!" she exclaimed. "So there'll be two happy unions shortly in the family? I'm delighted. I give the example. But you improve upon it. My sweetheart isn't worth anywhere near as much as yours."

"My dear girl, for God's sake, don't speak such nonsense," said Rosaura, trying to defend herself and unable to restrain her laughter.

Alcira renewed her previous conversation:

"Why, the old fellow, with you, becomes as sweet as a sugar-plum."

Olga added:

"All of Irurtia's money will be melted in the fires of this passion, deluging Rosaura and the Agualongas with gold."

"At least he will let us live and die in our home," insinuated Eufemia.

Eufemia, incredulous, and without conceding the slightest importance to Alicra's jest, had spoken merely for the sake of saying something. At the

same time with these hopeful words she translated her innermost feeling: the grief that she felt at the mere thought of abandoning the ancient home of her forbears, in which she herself had been born.

Rosaura finally became angry — as much as Rosaura could — and declared that she'd never step out again with Irurtia.

"I don't want any talk," she said, "linking me with that horrid old monster."

The conversation was shifted to other things, so as not to offend Rosaura. They even spoke of the never sufficiently estimated General Chicharra, who some days before, quite unusually, had failed to receive a governmental re-appointment.

After the meal and the table talk were over, Olga, arm in arm with Alcira, managed to inveigle her aunt into the patio. The moon was out. The two women stopped beneath the trees. The penetrating odor of the night-blooming cereus perfumed the atmosphere.

"But are you positive?" asked Olga of her aunt, without any preamble, as if following the line of a thought.

"Positive of what?" asked Alcira.

"Don't be a fool: positive that Irurtia likes my godmother."

"Ah, I had forgotten all about that! No, not sure. It seems to me, as I said, that the old fellow is more than usually fond of chatting with her. But it may well be because poor Rosaura, who is so good-natured, pays him such close attention, partly through courtesy, and partly that he may very soon hand over the money for your wedding."

"Is that all? May it not be through sheer timidity that this wily old hairy lizard doesn't speak out frankly to my godmother, if he really likes her? Just consider. He'd be a wonderful fish to catch. Farewell, poverty!"

"For God's sake, Olga, don't talk such absurdities. One would imagine you'd been brought up by Jews or that you're metallized like the Yankees, or that you'd wish Rosaura to sell herself, marrying a man she didn't love, as the Frenchwomen do."

"No, that's not what I mean."

"It would be better to forget the whole matter. Don't ever joke again about the old fellow and Rosaura. You see, she doesn't relish the jest at all."

"I agree with you," concluded Olga.

And they changed the subject.

That night, when Rosaura, Alcira and Eufemia were already fast asleep, Olga, who had not yet gone to bed, opened the window of her room.

The window looked out upon the patio. The perfume of the garden was wafted into the room and filled it as with balsam. The clear tropical moon shone in the blue patch of the sky that was framed by the window. Olga, in her nightgown, approached the window and gazed meditatively at the sky. The warm night breeze played with her filmy white gown, caressing Olga's elastic legs and filling her with the delight of the bath. Her loose, blonde tresses floated over her shoulders.

Ay, Dios mio! Que alborozo!
Ya la tapia cruje al fin!
Y entra el mozo, y con el mozo
entra el aura del jardín.

Besa el joven en la fresca
boca, á la niña en botón;
y la brisa picaresca
le alborota el camisón.[8]

Olga's thoughts turned to her approaching marriage. What did the future hold in store for her? She would never own coaches, horses, yachts, pearl necklaces, marble palaces! What a limited horizon! Never would she take, for example, a trip to India, to Benares, to Madras, to Bombay, to Calcutta, to the Hindu forests on a tiger hunt, mounted upon an elephant, in company of youthful Rajahs with dark eyes, bronzed skin and myriad jewels. She was fond of dark-complexioned men, of luxury, of adventure, of life. She longed to live, to enjoy, to dissipate, to be intoxicated with desire, love, champagne; to satisfy her whims, to dominate over men, reign over women: to be acclaimed, adored, hated, a celebrated beauty, happy. And what did fate promise her? A mediocre existence, obscure, subterraneous, boresome, monotonous; in Caracas, always the same old

[8] Good heavens! What alarm!
There's a sound on the garden wall.
The youth comes in, and with him,
The garden's sweet perfume.
The young man kisses the sweet mouth of the blooming maiden,
And the naughty breeze plays with her chemise.

Caracas; and poor, forever poor! A life brimming with unsatisfied desires, with yearnings impossible of fulfilment, with penury and unhappiness. What an injustice! For some people life was all honey; for others, all gall. Now she could understand why some women committed wild deeds. These women who eloped with a prince, who permitted themselves to be abducted by a tenor, who travel about the world singing, beholding new cities with every dawn, applauded by the women of the entire world, their purses well stocked with the gold of the five continents.

Gold! Gold! It was sad to confess; but this was the sole key that opened all doors, even the portals of happiness.

She thought of Irurtia. It occurred to her that she might marry the miser and become mistress of a fortune. But she recoiled in horror before the notion of such a union; before the idea of feeling Irurtia's hairy hand upon her fair, satin-like skin, and upon her breasts and her mouth the pale lips — most certainly cold and icy as those of a corpse — of that filthy old creature with the face of a rat. No, no, no. Impossible. She could not come through such an ordeal. "Rather hunger," she thought. "Sooner death." And to calm herself, she reasoned out the matter in the following way: "But this doesn't concern me at all; why suppose Irurtia would marry me? It's my godmother he's courting."

After a mental pause she added to herself: "And after all, why not? My godmother isn't a young girl of eighteen. If she doesn't seize her opportunity she'll be left an old maid. Besides, she's so

good, and always ready to sacrifice herself for everybody. One more sacrifice will cost her very little. And in return, how many benefits! What a change in her life, and in the life of all the rest of us!"

On the following day, when the time came for the women to dress and get ready for Irurtia, who would certainly come, with his chronometric regularity, at four o'clock sharp, Rosaura declared that she would not go out.

"Have you gone daft?" asked Alcira. "You're offended because of a harmless little joke. I assure you that had I known how you'd take it, I wouldn't have opened my lips. Come, now; put on your things."

"Do put on your things," repeated Eufemia ever so gently.

"No. I will not go. I don't want to hear my name coupled in jest with that of the old scarecrow who gives me the horrors. I don't care to look upon him or hear him again. Tomorrow Caracas will buzz with the rumor that I'm entertaining Irurtia's advances. I know Caracas: what begins as jesting gossip always ends as slander. The moment it gains currency, though none believes it, all the gossips pretend they do; and all the fools end by swallowing it whole."

"But who is going to repeat this joke of Alcira's?" Eufemia asked insinuatingly of her sister.

"Even if you're right, I refuse to go," replied Rosaura. "What occurs to Alcira can occur to any other."

Olga did not open her lips.

Alcira, really sorry to see how much to heart her

sister had taken her jest of the previous evening, repeated two or three times, sincerely penitent:

"If I had only known! The truth is that flies can't enter a closed mouth."

There was a silence. Eufemia broke it, saying:

"Go dress, Rosaura. We all know that there's nothing to it."

Rosaura, feeling beaten, and unaccustomed to resist, was about to yield, when she suddenly drew strength from her own weakness.

"No," she asserted. "I will not go. If what Alcira says is untrue, then my action will serve to prevent anybody from imagining it; if it's true, then by ceasing to go I'll nip the evil in the bud."

"Besides," she added, after a few moments of silence, "nobody can imagine how much Alcira's silly conjecture offends and disgusts me. Irurtia fills me with repugnance, nausea, horror. His hairy hands seem two spiders to me. His scrawny neck, his rat-like eyes, his yellow teeth, his ill-shaved face, his blackish-green frock-coat, his celluloid collar, the mouldy, damp, catarrhy odor that rises from him, all fill me with a sensation of physical revulsion. His ideas have the same effect upon me. If I repress my intense antipathy when I speak to him, it's for the sake of Olga, and for our own sake, so that he may make the exchange and give us the wretched pittance that we need."

"Then I refuse to go out with the old man myself," declared Alcira.

"I'll go along with you," volunteered Olga.

At that moment the three women were filled with admiration for Olga as for a person who performs an

act of Christian heroism for the benefit of another. The Sister of Charity who buries herself alive in a leper hospital was not more noble in the eyes of the three sisters, at that juncture, than Olga Emmerich.

IX

THE LOVERS' CHAT

AFTER dinner Olga, as on the previous day, left arm in arm with Alcira, engaged in conversation with her aunt; not, as on the day before, toward the garden of the patio, but in the direction of the salon. The room, already lighted, was awaiting the visit of Andrés Rata, Olga's sweetheart.

"Did you notice," asked Olga, "the disappointment written all over Irurtia's face when he saw that Rosaura wasn't going out?"

"I should say I did. The old fellow, though wily enough, was unable to hide it. Fortunately, the excuse we gave him seemed quite plausible. Anybody's liable to fall ill."

"He was a bit gloomy during the afternoon."

"Gloomy? You mean coarse and ready to shoot us for a *cuartillo*."

"Well, he's always that way."

"No, not always. During these past few days he's been as sweet as taffy. The change is incredible."

"May I not have been the cause? The old hairy lizard hates me almost as much as I do him."

"You the cause? And why? You couldn't have been more amiable nor polite."

This was true. Olga understood that the substitution of her fair and genteel person for Rosaura had fallen upon the old man like a jar of iced water. She did not lose courage, however, and during all that afternoon she brought into play every ability of her intelligence and her grace, employing every wile of seduction to conquer Irrutia's good-will, to make him forget her former bruskness, or at least, to make him lose that antipathy toward her which was so well-earned and which he so plainly displayed.

Don Camilo did not permit himself to be so easily tamed. He bristled like a porcupine.

The house he showed them was not worth a blade of grass. Olga, however, found it ideal.

"It's pretty," she declared. "I like it."

"Well, if you like it, young lady, all you have to do is make up your mind. I can't bother every day in the week and waste my time on a piece of business that won't realize me a *céntimo* of profit."

"If it depended upon me, señor Irurtia, I swear that I would accept it. Unfortunately the decision does not lie in my hands. It depends upon my aunts, and particularly upon my godmother."

Olga feared lest Irurtia should, in his ill-humor, break off all negotiations. And with Irurtia alienated, the entire structure of Olga's plans would crumble. She must hold on to don Camilo and sugar his pill with the hope of Rosaura.

She ventured to renew the conversation:

"The best thing to do would be for you to come whenever you find it convenient — tomorrow morning, if you wish — to our house. Rosaura will be

feeling better by then and between Rosaura, Eufemia, Alcira and you a decision can be reached."

Turning to Alcira, she consulted her meekly:

"Don't you think so, Alcira?"

Alcira, fearing to commit a blunder, could find nothing to say and finally expressed herself as being of the same opinion.

Olga went on:

"The house is good, acceptable, recently painted, light and airy. I don't believe there's another of its kind that's so pretty, let alone prettier. For the rest, señor Irurtia, regarding what you'll offer in cash, my godmother and my aunts will surely come to an agreement with you. They are not very hard to satisfy, particularly my godmother, who is an angel; and you, on your side, are a gentleman."

"I am a business man, young lady."

Irurtia retorted with such rudeness that Olga yielded her place to Alcira. "Let her do the talking," she said to herself, "and catch the downpour of his wrath. The old fellow evidently can't bear the sight of me. There is no doubt about it; I can't carry on the fight against this Leviathan of greed and coarseness myself; I'll have to look for allies to help vanquish him. As for my godmother, I'll see to her. It's impossible that this hairy lizard should go to the grave with his millions. Let him get married and let his money bask in the sunlight."

Irurtia, breaking his custom, did not accompany the women to their house; he bade them adieu at the door of the dwelling which he had brought them to inspect. A friend of the Agualongas, meeting them on the premises, insisted upon accompanying them

home, and not only upon accompanying; she followed them into the house and chatted with them until seven. At seven, when she left, they served the evening meal. It was only when they rose from the table that Olga was able to exchange a few words with Alcira in privacy — impressions of the afternoon and of don Camilo.

"And you say that Irurtia, on previous days, was not so rude as today?"

"I tell you that he was as sweet as taffy — as soft as caramel."

"Then there's no doubt about it; he's in love with my godmother. And he was provoked because he couldn't see her. And since he's a tactless creature without any social breeding at all, he shows his ill humor. Don't you think so?"

"You may be right," replied Alcira. "But it would be best for Rosaura not to see this fellow again. He'll soon forget; Rosaura will not suffer from the presumptuous advances of the shameless old wretch, nor from the gossip and idle talk that Caracas will be full of if the matter ever becomes public."

"The trouble is that we've already invited him to come here one of these afternoons to reach an understanding with my godmother, Eufemia and you."

"Yes; but everything will be arranged. Rosaura can be indisposed or have had a relapse on the day that Irurtia comes."

"That's so," replied Olga pensively. "Everything can be arranged . . ."

At this moment Andrés Rata came in.

It was nine o'clock.

Alcira withdrew a few moments later, leaving the sweethearts seated on the window seats, engrossed in a lovers' chat.

Through the open window came the light of the municipal lamps, the voices of passers-by who conversed as they walked along the street, the noise of coaches and street-cars, the confused sounds of the thoroughfare, the notes of a waltz that winged from a neighboring balcony and dissolved in the air.

Rosaura entered the room.

After nodding to Olga's betrothed she sat down in the center of the room, beneath a lamp. While she silently watched over the lovers from a distance, as one who does not relish the task, she busied herself with crochet work — a handkerchief of Maracaibo *soles* for her niece's trousseau.

The lovers continued to converse at the window, in a low voice. Rosaura could hear only an indistinct lisping, a whispering.

"I have news for you," began Olga.

"Very well. Let's hear it."

"A piece of news that may be of the utmost importance to us."

"Fine. Tell me right away."

"I really don't know whether I ought to."

Andrés Rata's curiosity was roused. He fairly itched to know this piece of news that might be of the utmost importance to both, and which Olga hesitated to impart.

"I don't know whether I ought to," repeated Olga.

"Why don't you know whether you ought to? Do you doubt me?"

"I shouldn't care to have the news spread through Caracas."

"Then you think me a traitor, an imprudent fool, a . . ."

"I think you nothing," interrupted Olga. "But if the matter becomes public, the whole advantage may escape us. There must be plenty of malevolent folk interested in our failure."

Poor Andrés Rata's curiosity had reached its climax. He begged, he kissed her hands, more through servility than through love. He whined, complaining that Olga had no confidence in him.

When Olga, who managed her lover as if he were a marionette, wearied of toying with her puppet — when she had tired of playing with him as a cat plays with a rat, she decided to communicate the good news to him.

Andrés Rata went into ecstasy.

"Wonderful! Magnificent! Your godmother, married to Irurtia, will become the mistress of the whole fortune. Your godmother adores you; she denies you nothing. We shall be rich."

"Hush!" commanded Olga, holding her batiste handkerchief against Andrés Rata's horrible thick lips, as if to thrust back his words into his mouth with the fine piece of cloth, and with a gesture similar to that employed in frightening away a fly.

"And what about her? Does she consent? Is your family willing?"

"Those are matters that rest with us, my dear boy. Don't imagine that this affair is going to be as easy as sucking a licorice stick."

"For God's sake, Olga, you treat me like a

stranger. Tell me. She — your godmother — how does she take Irurtia?"

"She doesn't want to."

"Ah! *Caramba!* That makes things complicated:"

"I repeat — this affair won't be a trifle. But I already have mapped out my campaign. And my first lieutenant will be uncle Aquiles."

"General Chicharra? Magnificent! Magnificent!" cried Andrés Rata, who found everything Olga said to be wisdom itself. His submission was similar to that of Tomasa to Camilo, although of a different nature; he was ever ready to applaud and to submit.

"And I? Where do I come in? I'm ready to serve you in any way, to aid you faithfully."

"You? Listen and shut up. . . . I was going to give you a message for my uncle Aquiles. But it will be better for me to speak with him personally."

Then, in more kindly and affectionate manner, she added:

"You know that if I aspire to anything it is not for myself alone. You and I in the near future will form but a single soul with two bodies."

He swore that he loved her more every time he saw her.

And they continued to converse at the window, in lowered tones, almost in secret.

Rosaura continued to crochet her handkerchief of Maracaibo *soles* by the light of the lamp in the center of the salon. The sidewalk continued to resound with the footsteps of the passers-by.

Through the open window there continued to come in the noises of the street, the light of the city lamps and the music of the waltz, ten times ended and ten times begun over again.

In the meantime, within the house, Alcira, in the corridor, was thumbing over the pages of *La Religión,* a daily newspaper that kept the Agualongas in touch with the Catholic and non-Catholic world and through which they formed their opinions upon the daily happenings in Caracas, in Venezuela, in America, in Europe, in the whole world. Eufemia, in her room, was saying her prayers. The cook was scouring pans, washing dishes or sweeping the kitchen before going to bed. Her daughter, a half-witted midget of some fifteen years, who kept the house tidy, attended to the beds and, in short, did all the minor and menial chores, had been snoring ever since she had finished waiting on the table and then supped herself.

In the *patio,* which was flooded by the moonlight, the breeze, as it wafted through the trees, murmured softly; the air was filled with the nocturnal, insinuating perfume of the night-blooming cereus, and the broad-leaved turiara — that magical plant of an Oriental tale — exhaled its musical plaint to the light of the moon.

X

A COMMON TYPE OF LIBERAL

UNDER the first pretext that occurred to her, Olga saw to it that Alcira should be her companion on her visit to the home of that incomparable general, don Aquiles Chicharra, the husband of Gertrudis Agualonga.

When they arrived it was something like ten in the morning.

While Alcira, as soon as she entered, became enwrapped in her sister and the little Chicharras, Olga, under the pretext that the eldest of her cousins did not come at once to receive her, went out of the parlor to the corridor, calling her:

"Cousin Tula, don't be so lazy and so vain. Asleep or dressing at such a late hour! Aren't you ashamed of yourself?"

"Come in, Olga. Come to my room."

On the way thither Olga met General Chicharra, who, in the belief that he was uttering a clever jest, greeted her with this silly remark:

"What scandal is this, in my very home? How does the little rascal dare!"

Olga smiled vacuously, out of mere courtesy, and clasping the hand that Chicharra offered her, said to him in a low voice:

"Uncle, you and I must have a talk for five minutes, alone. I came expressly to tell you so."

"Good. Let's talk. What's up?"

"No. Not here."

"But what mystery do you call this?"

Tula's voice came from her room:

"Are you coming, Olga? Come!"

"Just a moment," shouted Olga. "I'm speaking with my uncle."

And turning to the general, she said:

"It's as important to you as it is to me."

"*Caracoles!* You've stirred my curiosity! Step into the dining-room for a moment. There's nobody there."

"No, no. I'll wait for you tomorrow at the window of the house, around five. I'll be alone. Not a word to anybody. Remember, now: at five."

Tula was approaching them. Noticing their whispered conversation, she exclaimed, with innocent malice:

"You seem like conspirators."

Olga, as if to heighten the jest of her cousin's words and deprive them of any real significance, continued aloud to Chicharra, in Tula's presence:

"You understand, then, general. And not a word to anybody."

Even when the uncle and his niece parted Tula was still jesting about the conspirators, and Olga, too, at the moment of departure, shouted from the door to the famous Chicharra:

"Remember, General. Be punctual and discreet."

The young Chicharras exploded with laughter.

"This Olga," said one of them when their visitors had left, "is full of the most stupendous things."

"She's quite capable," declared Chicharra's wife, "of hatching a genuine conspiracy."

Chicharra said nothing. But he was thinking hard. Aquile Chicharra was a huge stomach upon two short legs, a billowy neck between his shoulders, and a plump-cheeked face. This helped to individualize his whale-like aspect, sharply characterizing his countenance, which was blunt of feature: a thick nose between pink and ruby, and seemingly without nostrils — a fleshy nose in the form of an acorn, or rather, an acorn barnacle.

This sack of fat was also a wine-skin full of silliness and a blister of vanity. But neither the silliness nor the vanity, nor the fat attained to the proportions of his vileness. Vanity, which plays the rôle of pride in those who cannot show pride, is not usually found in company of servility in the same person's character. In Aquiles Chicharra they dwelt fraternally side by side. Perhaps he had not been born to be a servant; but from his youth he had of set purpose worn the lackey's livery and that uniform of servitude had clung to his skin: slavery formed part of his moral being, even as his hair, his bones and his greasy, billowy flesh formed part of his physical being.

His vanity consisted in that subaltern vanity which feeds upon mere nothings, since it cannot stand a fare of resounding deeds. For instance, don Aquiles boasted that he could walk or had walked the distance between the Plaza Bolívar and his house in more time or less time than any other person.

"Yesterday," he would say at his own table, "I left the house at eight o'clock in the morning and didn't reach the Federal Palace till eleven. Three

hours for a walk that ordinarily takes twenty minutes. That can happen only to me. And why such a delay, you will ask? Well, simply because I met so many friends who stopped me and insisted on having a chat with me."

His political career traced a dazzling parabola.

"I have been everything in Venezuela," the famous Chicharra would aver. "Everything except Archbishop and President."

And this was true.

Lacking talent, lacking ideas, without ideals, without worth, foresight, education, patriotism, devoid of personality or of any indications of statesmanship, with not a jot of the warrior in his make-up, not an atom of the publicist, not a drop of the journalist, Aquiles Chicharra, by his very lack of weight, always floated like a cork upon the surface of the political waters. He lived constantly upon the national budget, stuck like an oyster to the Treasury of the Republic or sucking at it like a leech.

His one virtue was his passivity.

Every time a man was needed to sign something that nobody else was willing to sign, Aquiles Chicharra was Johnny on the spot: whereupon he would be made Minister; when a man was needed to say something that nobody else cared to say, there was Aquiles Chicharra: whereupon he would be made Deputy; if it was necessary to condemn some innocent fellow, there was Aquiles Chicharra, ready as ever: whereupon they made him judge.

Since he was good for nothing he served for everything.

During the intervals of these high services he lent others, less conspicuous, though at times no less useful — such as worming into the friendship and the homes of persons, sounding a certain So-and-so, or going to Europe to purchase a yacht for the President's pleasure — a yacht that would afterwards be charged to the nation at the price of an armored cruiser.

Aquiles Chicharra was the cheapest of political rogues. That was why he was preferred to all others. He had occupied almost every public charge, yet was not rich; he had sullied his name in the shadiest and vilest of speculation and peculation, and his hands, if they were not clean, were empty. So that he would often exclaim:

"I have filled every office in the Republic and I have barely enough to live upon. And yet they'll say afterwards that we 'yellow liberals' of Venezuela aren't honest patriots!"

The fact that he had barely enough to live upon, as he put it, coupled with the habit of battening upon the nation's budget and eating at its expense to the point of believing himself defrauded if two weeks passed by without receiving money for some reason or other, compelled Chicharra to resort to fawning, to genuflexions, to protestations of loyalty, and to constant dancing attendance in the anterooms of Ministers and Presidents, either to make sure of holding on to a place or to beg one. He was tolerated as one who could prove useful at the right moment and who should be near at hand. He was as necessary and as hard to get rid of as the setter is to the hunter.

The politicians used him as fishermen use the cast-net; after the fishing was over they would throw the instrument aside. But in this case the instrument had the power of speech and rebelled at being set aside in a corner. Some of Chicharra's former accomplices, or persons who had made use of so compliant a servant, would say of him:

"Poor Aquiles. He's a good liberal. He has lent many a service to the cause. We can't leave him without anything."

"Without anything," meant without some sinecure.

In order to win for himself quickly forgotten gratitude or renewed favors, previous services did not suffice; he must repeat them and make frequent protestations that he was ready to sacrifice himself for the government; he must know how to win the good will of the successive leaders by dint of much cringing and obsequious bowing.

Whether Pedro or Juan were at the helm, the self-denying Chicharra was always ready to sacrifice himself for the government, collecting his pay for the sacrifice every fortnight from the National Treasury and rewarding those in power with heaped adulation.

His title of General had a grotesque and most amusing origin that was already beginning to be forgotten.

Having been named Governor of a Federal Territory in which the Executive of the Republic, or more plainly speaking, the President, desired to commit some unheard of atrocity, Chicharra was soon confronted with an uprising against him. Whereupon

he surrounded himself with the most brilliant group of officers and set out in search of the enemy, located the rebels, discharged his batteries against them . . . and came out with colors flying — away from the enemy.

"I came out with flying colors," he explained later, when he reported the news of the engagement to the President.

Indeed, filled with martial ardor and not for a moment doubting the heroism of his troops, Chicharra had abandoned his post of danger, gone off to a safe position and telegraphed to the President:

> *"Formidable encounter with the rebels at La Rochela. We are fighting like lions. I announce complete victory. I congratulate you and I congratulate the Liberal Party on the occasion of the glorious triumph of our arms. I am, as ever, always ready for sacrifice. Count upon me unconditionally.*
>
> *Your loyal friend and subordinate,*
>
> *AQUILES CHICHARRA"*

Chicharra's bellicose ardor, which was not employed face to face with the enemy with his weapons in his grasp, but rather in the telegraph office with his unconditional pen in his right hand, played the prudent Aquiles an ill turn.

No sooner had he despatched that telegram to the President than the troops of Governor Chicharra turned about face and ran. The rebels had triumphed. Chicharra's victory was transformed

into a rout. The officers accused Chicharra of blustering cowardice which had provided the example for the troops' flight.

"For God's sake!" exclaimed the whale-like Aquiles, in melodramatic accents. "Let us pardon one another in the name of the Liberal Party, and let us prove that we are ready for all sacrifices."

These magic words cleared the horizon and prevented a squabble.

Three or four times Chicharra encountered the rebels and three or four times he came out with flying colors to announce a new victory to the President of the Republic. After the fourth victory obtained by telegraph over the rebels, Aquiles Chicharra appeared in Caracas. The Territory was left in the hands of the revolutionists.

Caracas burst into raucous laughter at Chicharra's victories. The phrase "a Chicharra victory" became a veritable by-word to signify a grotesque defeat.

In a certain malicious sheet there appeared a sarcastic advertisement:

AQUILES CHICHARRA'S STABLE

Offers Victories To The Public[9]

And over the telephone malicious, waggish persons would get him crazy ordering victorias for a drive.

But time had passed, and not in vain. Chicharra's victories were gradually forgotten: there was for-

[9] The Spanish word "victoria" means both *victory* and that type of vehicle known as a victoria. Hence the sarcastic pun.

gotten also the burlesque origin of his title, General. He was no longer addressed as such in jest, but out of habit. He himself, with the most insolent self-assurance would even have his cards printed in this fashion:

GENERAL AQUILES CHICHARRA

Ex-Minister, Ex-Deputy
Ex-Administrator of the Customs, Ex-Territorial Governor, Etc., Etc., Etc.

The celebrated and imponderable general did not visit the Agualonga home. Politics absorbed him completely. How was he to have any time to waste in visiting pauperish relatives who, in addition, were exceedingly religious and conservative!

Olga was his favorite in that house. He was, in his own way, fond of Olga. Who was it, if not he, that had brought Andrés Rata together with Olga? Who had cleverly introduced Rata into the Agualonga home, despite the desperate opposition of his sisters-in-law? Who had succeeded in establishing him in that home, thus aiding Olga's cause?

It is true that he acted in this manner, primarily to be useful to Andrés Rata, who, if he was the natural son of an old mulatto woman of Carupano, was a young liberal and a pro-government journalist. But it is likewise true that in so acting he had pleased Olga and that Chicharra took pleasure in pleasing her.

So that Olga and the general were united by this bond of betrothal.

And other bonds united them.

When Olga was yet a little girl — scarcely thirteen years old — she used to come to spend the day with Tula. Besides going to school together, they were both of the same age. Chicharra took advantage of the opportunity. He would entice Olga to his room and, sitting down and conversing upon anything that came to his mind, he would begin to fondle his niece, not as a father does, allowing his hands to fall from her head to her cheeks, but like a cunning satyr. Olga, who would realize what he was about, would dash from the room.

Two years later Aquiles, on a certain occasion, tried to shower her with kisses. Olga was no longer a child. She gave the faun a tremendous cuff. And the general let her alone. Ever since that day he had had more respect for his niece. Her hand could strike. The slave bowed beneath the yoke. And he cherished no rancor against her.

Not only did he feel no ill will toward her, but he invited her to the theatre very often, taking her together with Tula, and he even had her come to spend several weeks with the Chicharra family at pleasure resorts, now in the Los Toques mountains in August, now in December and January at Macuto beach.

For Olga to visit the Chicharra family in company of Alcira, Rosaura, or even Eufemia, who went out very little, seemed quite natural.

What struck Chicharra as most unusual was Olga's mysterious speech, and above all, the assignation. He was lost in conjecture. He imagined that perhaps some disagreement had arisen between Andrés

Rata and the girl; but he dismissed this hypothesis as absurd. Olga had that fellow at her beck and call. What in thunder could it be? Despite his political occupations and his courtly preoccupations, Aquiles awaited most impatiently the hour of the rendez-vous and he was there punctually.

In a few words Olga made the whole situation clear.

As a result of being thrown together with Rosaura during the negotiations for a new house, Irurtia had fallen in love with her; Rosaura would not even hear of the matter, yet it would be terrible to let such an opportunity and so many millions escape their clutches. She had come to her uncle for advice in the dilemma.

Aquiles felt disappointed.

"I thought it was about something else," he said.

His wife had no share in the mansion of the three Agualonga sisters, any more than had Olga, the child of another Agualonga. Olga's mother, as well as Chicharra's wife, had been given at the time of their marriage the share of the inheritance that was their due. Therefore this business about an exchange of houses was not of the slightest interest to Chicharra and he vowed that he would have nothing to do with it. Let each shift for himself and carry out the transaction as best he could. As for Irurtia's passion and Rosaura's repulsion, he didn't care a fig about either.

"I'll carry no candle at this burial," he declared to Olga, to signify his withdrawal from all participation.

"But, uncle, how about your advice?"

"I tell you that I wash my hands clean of it, like Pilate."

Then Olga, who had already concocted her plan, addressed him reprovingly:

"Why, you don't seem the same Aquiles Chicharra as of old. You've degenerated, Uncle. You are inferior to your reputation. How, now! Can you be the man who has occupied so many and so varied public posts with such distinction? Are you he who dominated so many political crises? Are you, like Bolívar, 'the man for difficulties'?"

Aquiles felt himself being bathed in rose water. His vanity emerged like a sea-covered isle when the tide goes out. The little rascal knew him well. He listened with a placid countenance to his niece's reproaches.

Unwilling to interrupt this celestial music he limited himself to murmuring:

"My dear girl! But, my dear girl!"

"No, Uncle, don't destroy my illusion. Let me preserve the opinion I formed of you at the very first. At least, let me not lose the illusion that you are a most clever schemer, an intriguer of genius, like don Vicente Amengual."

This was the summit of flattery. Chicharra could no longer resist. As for comparing him with Bolívar, well, that could be dismissed. He possessed qualities which Bolívar had lacked. But to compare him with don Vicente Amengual? Holy heavens!

"Niece," he began, unable to contain himself. "You are the only person that understands me."

"I should say I do understand you, Uncle. You

are a superior man: you have even the scrupulousness that characterizes a superior man. You don't become entangled in your wings. Upward, ever upward! Flying higher, every flying!" Chicharra was now taking deep breaths. His rosy, whale-like nose seemed to redden with pleasure. And his chubby, cherub-like countenance lit up with the smile of the blessed.

Olga continued:

"Just because I understand you, Uncle, I cannot explain your indifference in this matter. Money is always money."

"But, my dear niece, what do I gain by it if Irurtia is a wealthy man and if Rosaura detests him or not?"

"Uncle, for God's sake, look ahead. Plumb the future. Irurtia, married to Rosaura, means Rosaura the possessor of millions. That old fellow can't live very long."

"Excellent! Rosaura a millionairess! And how does that concern me?"

"Rosaura rich means that I'll be rich. She'll give me, in one way or another, whatever I ask of her. And if I get rich, is there anything that I wouldn't do for you, Uncle, and for my cousin Tula?"

"These are all sweet, airy nothings."[10]

"Another thing, Uncle. Rosaura will not have any children, as you may well understand, from that old lizard of an Irurtia. Rosaura's heirs are Eufemia, Alcira and my aunt Gertrudis, your wife. May God preserve my godmother for us many years.

[10] Original: *música celestial;* literally, "heavenly music"—a familiar phrase for vain, high-sounding promises.

But nobody can tell what's liable to happen. Irurtia's millions, in part, may go to you and your family."

"Frankly, I hadn't seen the thing in such a light."

"Then see it now."

Uncle and niece at last came to a thorough understanding.

General Chicharra was to come some afternoon to the Agualonga home and there meet, accidentally, señor Irurtia. Olga would tell him when. Once in the presence of the enemy, the general would launch his campaign. At first, he would demonstrate his appreciation of Irurtia's attitude toward the Agualonga family during the negotiations. Under some clever pretext or other he would manage to become involved in the exchange of the houses and would thus come three or four times into intimate contact with Irurtia.

As soon as the fruit ripened, it would be eaten. Irurtia would be invited to dine at the general's; there would be plenty to eat and drink, much deference shown to him, and lots of honey.

The Agualongas would attend the dinner, not knowing that Irurtia, too, had been invited.

As for Rosaura, silence. Olga would take care of her godmother.

PART TWO

I

THE CRUSTACEAN

IT was a few minutes after six in the afternoon. Dusk was already lighting its capricious lamps, and the western sky was bejewelled with golden glints.

The crags of the Avila were turning a dark green, while through the valley of Caracas, toward Petare, the glory of the sun, like an overflowing Orinoco, poured along its luminous path. It was not the hot, gleaming light of midday falling from the zenith and illuminating everything, even the shadows of the trees, but a pale, balmy, golden clearness that fluttered afar, in the fields, above the green patches of the cultivated land, setting afire the western windows of the city, which seemed the prey to a conflagration.

Pleasure coaches roll by containing women dressed in bright colors and men garbed in black. The street-cars, jammed, ride off to the distant sections. Workingmen come by, toil-worn, with large rings under their eyes, dressed in drill; modest industrial toilers wearing trousers fretted with wrinkles and sack-coats of faded cashmere and alpaca stained at work; countless Germans from the business houses;

in addition to one or another afternoon passer-by there is a governess with her brood of children, this or that poor couple going out for a breath of fresh air, and returning in the *carozza di tutti,* the mother who exhibits on the street and the squares her offspring in skirts, and another who parades her marriageable daughter through the fashion shops and intimate salons, where there are more young men than young women. . . . And amid this heterogeneous crowd there hasten along homeward, or to a chat in the café before returning to their families, those whom duty has all day long kept busy with mercantile, shop or office affairs.

While this twilight public hurried along the street Andrés Rata, standing outside, exchanged lovers' talk with Olga Emmerich, who was seated in the window of the Agualonga living-room.

In another corner of that same room don Camilo and Rosaura were chatting by themselves. It might have been said that they, too, were exchanging lovers' talk.

"And is that affair progressing?" Rata asked his sweetheart, alluding to the relations of the old man with Rosaura.

"So so," replied Olga. "God alone knows what it costs us to convince my godmother that she ought to be at least tolerant."

Andrés Rata was, physically, an ill-shaped youth of blackish skin — an agile, bony, undersized mulatto with a hanging blubber-lip and yellowish eyes. One seeks instinctively in such a person a tail, for it is hard to tell at first sight whether this is the metamorphosis of a monkey turned man, or the degenera-

tion of man who has reverted to the ape. At all events, one's eyes look for a tail, thinking that the regular life of such a hominoid must be arboreal. Morally he was even worse: filthy, as infectious as the saliva of a consumptive and more vile than vileness itself. Beside him, the famous Chicharra appeared a most worthy man, or almost such.

How had he attained to Olga? How could this nit lodge and make its nest in the blonde hair of this beautiful creature of white and gold? That was a complicated tale, the masterpiece of Chicharra and Emmerich.

When Olga, in response to her sweetheart's question that afternoon, declared that the affair between Rosaura and the bloodsucking miser was by no means flying beneath a blue sky, or sailing straight before the wind over an oily sea, Andrés Rata, with that inhuman impatience of one who awaits another's sacrifice for his own benefit, insinuated:

"Your aunt, with all her fastidiousness, is endangering every one of us."

The remark roused Olga's ire, and in mingled jest and reproof she exclaimed:

"See here, simpleton. You just hold your tongue and be patient."

He tried to redeem his blunder.

"I speak as I do on your account. You know that the only interest I have in this matter is that of our speedy marriage."

Olga, with that little esteem she felt for the man she was going to marry, replied sententiously and cruelly:

"No, Andrés; when a man is anxious to get mar-

ried he looks about and makes up his mind to get the money that's needed; he doesn't wait for it to come from somebody else."

Rata tried to object.

She quieted him, laughing at his display of such unusual spirit and at the fact that he should consider himself hurt by mere words. A "Come, Andrés dear, don't be a fool," calmed him completely.

The more than despotic authority that Olga Emmerich exercised over this man who was as vile as he was weak — a power that a woman rarely discovers before marriage — triumphed over Rata's attempts at rebellion without the need of using any pressure.

This man, accustomed to fawn upon everybody, through the very necessity of his servile character, and as if it were the only means of getting himself to be tolerated, obeyed, as if by a secret impulse, the most imperious of the personalities with whom he came into contact. He did not sell or exploit his vileness, as Aquiles Chicharra did. No. He was servile by nature, by vocation, free of charge. At the age of eighteen he had already dedicated rhymed praises to the President of the Republic, whom he did not know and from whom he expected nothing. He was a dillettante of servility; he rejoiced, through the coprophagous instinct of the cockroach, in feeding upon excrement. The vanity of being betrothed to such a beautiful white woman, added to the sincere love of the youth and his innate servility, made of Andrés Rata a puppet which Olga danced about when and however she pleased.

His feelings having been soothed, and still filled with curiosity as to the results of the relations between Irurtia and Rosaura — a curiosity that obeyed a vague and obscure sentiment of intensely personal, sordid interest — the half-breed asked:

"And Irurtia? Doesn't he speak of marriage?"

More tractable than before, Olga replied:

"Not a word."

"But how does he explain the almost daily visits that he pays to you, and his secret conversations with Rosaura?"

"Why, he doesn't explain them, my boy, and we're not so foolish as to ask explanations."

"On the day you least expect he's liable to go off never to return. He's a wily chap. You've got to catch him by trickery. And at least, let him as soon as possible settle the exchange of the houses; then we'll be able to marry as quickly as may be."

"As for Irurtia going off, he won't. He falls more in love with Rosaura every time he sees her, and Rosaura, on her part, will learn gradually to look upon him with less antipathy. When Irurtia does at last speak of marriage — if he does — my godmother will already have become used to the idea. The difficulty has been in reaching the point we've already come to: to have her receive him. You can't imagine how much she has suffered, and how much she cried. She says that she yielded for our sake. Poor godmother!"

"And the exchange?"

"That will take place. The house that Irurtia's giving us is being remodelled. It's almost done. It was the best we could do. But they had to re-

pair it almost from top to bottom. And that takes time. Before a month it will be ready, and then we two can fix the date of our marriage."

At the mention of marriage, Andrés Rata's hanging blubber-lip contracted in a smile; and it was the same smile that Irurtia found upon the mulatto's face when he approached the window to bid Olga good-night. Olga, for some time past, had become as sweet as sugar to don Camilo; don Camilo no longer looked upon her with his former antipathy, and the old rancor had vanished.

Scarcely had Irurtia appeared in the shadow of the entrance to the Agualonga's outer vestibule than Andrés Rata said good-bye to his sweetheart with the premeditated purpose of accompanying don Camilo a few blocks and fawning upon him.

Ever since the dealer in houses — after that dinner at the Chicharra home — had begun to increase the frequency of his visits, almost lover-fashion, toward dusk, Andrés Rata believed it his duty to court Olga at the selfsame hour. Daily he would wait for the shrivelled old fellow to come out of the Agualongas', that he might accompany him a part of the way and shower him with adulation.

Why does Andrés Rata fawn upon folk? Ask the bird why it flies and the river why it flows along, and the rosebush why it grows roses, and the mango-tree why it gives fruit. Why does Andrés Rata adulate folk? Through organic necessity, through instinct, through temperament, through the law of his nature. That homunculus with skin between copper-color and black — that Rata with the cringing soul, felt the imperative need of bowing before

everybody, of seeking someone before whom to cringe, curving his neck and his spine, for his knees tended to genuflexion by a movement as natural and spontaneous as that of breathing.

He had even discharged his salvo of adulations against the usurer from the columns of that sheet called *El Constitucional,* a center of infection that plunged almost the entire Republic into an epidemic of vileness — a malodorous periodical that left a sewer-like reputation. "I'll win him through his vanity," thought Andrés Rata, without really knowing just why he should desire to win Irurtia.

The money-lender, on his part, suspected the mulatto's genuflexions. Nothing so shocked Irurtia as to see his name in print. Ever since, three years before, those burglars had visited his house at night, and the State had poked its nose into the doncamilesque[11] methods of conducting usury, the name of Irurtia had not appeared in the gazettes nor in the daily chronicles. Finding it now in *El Constitucional,* the administration paper, first in connection with the banquet at Chicharra's home and afterwards under the most triviàl pretexts, the usurer was not in the slightest degree flattered.

Don Camilo had of old professed that fear of the press which is felt by all who have lived a life that will not bear publicity. No excessive light for clothes, consciences or lives that bear stains. His inextinguishable foundation of mistrust was stirred; and from that slimy bed of unclean, gelatinous sentiments rose an almost defensive prayer, which he was on the point of uttering, for Andrés Rata to stop

[11] Formed, of course, from don Camilo.

mentioning him in the press, not even by way of praise. But don Camilo Irurtia, who, if not the wings of an eagle, had the wings of a bat — that is to say, who was of a membranous, nocturnal spirit, and capable of flight, however awkward and unsuccessful it might seem — did not wish to show the displeasure he felt when the press began to bandy his name, even though it burnt incense before that name. "I won't let him discover my irritation," he said to himself, thinking of Rata; "neither will I show contentment or the slightest gratitude. It would work in the opposite way to which I intended." Therefore when Andrés Rata announced two or three times that *El Constitucional* had on the previous evening referred to "the great financier, with the admiration that was his due," the usurer, who knew by heart the sheet referred to, would reply: "Good; I'll buy a copy of the paper and see what it says." Wherefore Irurtia was in no wise affected by the pompous phrases of adulation nor the odorous incense that Rata burned before his nostrils.

Andrés Rata could inspire him only with an ineradicable feeling of mistrust, although Irurtia could not understand why. No sooner would he encounter Rata than don Camilo would be on his guard, with the precaution of one who catches sight of a sign: *"Beware of Pickpockets."*

That afternoon, when Irurtia, issuing from the Agualonga zaguán, passed by the window where Olga and her betrothed were conversing, the latter annexed himself to the usurer and together they walked off up the street.

The sun had set. The shadows, suddenly, like a curtain being drawn, darkened all space. In the vault of the firmament, which shortly before had been blue and had changed to an indistinct darkness, white Venus was already shining like a drop of luminous water, while reddish Mars gleamed like a live coal. At the foot of Mars were the Geminae, greenish yellow with envy. Stars here and there blinked their golden eyes.

In the street, more modest lights — the municipal lamps — likewise glittered; and the gas butterflies fluttered their restless wings of light, while the electric arcs seemed chimerical birds in globular glass cages, nervously and resplendently flitting about.

"Only a moment ago," said Andrés to his companion, for the sake of saying something — "only a moment ago the sun was shining, and all at once — pum! — night."

As don Camilo made no reply, Andrés Rata continued:

"Have you ever noticed, don Camilo, how brief our tropical twilights are? In other zones, they say . . ."

Irurtia interrupted him with evident displeasure:

"Frankly, I never did; nor do I know any other land than my own, nor can I compare the twilights of Caracas, which I may say I have never seen, because they have never attracted my attention, with those of other zones, which, I repeat, I don't know."

Taking the money-lender's rudeness as a joke, Andrés exclaimed:

"Do you mean to say you've never seen any sunsets, don Camilo? One would imagine you were blind!"

And ironically, he added:

"It's such a beautiful sight . . . and so cheap!"

"Cheap, you say, meaning that it does not cost money? That may be, for somebody else. Not for me, though. The half hour that I might waste in barren contemplation I employ in resting body and spirit, in recovering strength to be used next day and translated into money, or else I dedicate it to thinking, or to carrying out what has already been planned. My time is money. If I waste it, I lose. Now you see."

"But life should be sweetened, don Camilo. Not everything should be work. And you can't deny that this sight produces pleasure. The painters and poets . . ."

"But I'm neither a painter nor a poet. As for artists, that's another matter. They do very well to contemplate Nature; that's their business. Besides giving them pleasure, such contemplation is in their line. Don't imagine that they're so disinterested; that, I repeat, is their business. Men would be disinterested if they devoted themselves to that which does not give them pleasure, or fame, or gain: a poet, to medicine; a physician, to painting; a painter, to industry; a manufacturer, to astronomy; an astronomer, to chemistry. But that painters and poets should take pleasure in the contemplation of Nature is neither novel nor is it disinterested endeavor; that, I repeat, is their business. As to the theory of sweetening life, it seems

very sensible to me. Only that some sweeten it with one thing and some with another. I, too, eat sugar . . . of my own kind."

They were approaching the corner. Don Camilo wished to get rid of Andrés Rata, and asked him:

"And you, what direction are you taking?"

"This one," replied the human leech, waving his arm vaguely.

"Well, I'm going this way," said Irurtia, indicating the opposite street.

Andrés Rata understood — how could he have failed to do so? — Irurtia's intention, which, if it were not outright offensive at least clearly revealed his desire to shake himself free of his companion, and in his heart, without being able to help it, he applauded the money-lender's brusk manner. "This man is a power," he thought to himself. "He doesn't entangle himself in vain formulas, but goes straight and boldly to his objective." Rata's corneas gleamed yellow in the light of a street-lamp, as if they were streaked with nicotine. The purple blubber-lip of the negroid contracted into an indefinable grimace, while Andrés grasped the hand of the rogue in this enforced good-bye.

Through his inner feeling of insignificance, of littleness, or perhaps of cowardice, Rata inwardly applauded this bold fellow who had just insulted him, or what amounted to the same thing, with an undisguised scorn.

How distinct he was from Irurtia! He felt the necessity of smiling, of fawning, of kissing hands, of licking feet; his sole preoccupation consisted in getting himself to be tolerated, as if he had no

genuine right to existence. The strong spirits who fought as strong spirits filled him with antipathy. He fought in another manner; not with his fists and his teeth, like Irurtia, but with honied words, adulating smiles, foot-scrapings and doffings of his hat. But those strong personalities who had already arrived at the summit, either of power or of fortune, inspired in him the utmost respect. He would never have been able to attack them. He loved Olga not so much for her beauty or for herself as because she represented, first of all, a social value, and secondly, because of the belle's imperious, dominating character; that is to say, in her he beheld will-power, courage, dominion, the lash, his master.

Andrés Rata, covered by his ignominy as by a protective shell, flexible despite its hard surface, belongs to a species of crustacean as yet unclassified. The integument of this crustacean is invisible to the eye: it is a crust formed in the soul; but that crust does not prevent agility in vileness, for it possesses segments, just as do the shells of the crustaceans known to zoology.

II

RHEUMATISM AND LOVESICKNESS

WHEN, that afternoon, having paid his daily visit to the Agualongas, Irurtia returned to his wretched shack after his conversation with the crustacean Andrés Rata, he found that supper was not only not served, but that it was not even on the way.

Stretched out on her cot, with a yellow and red Madras kerchief covering her white head of hair, whose locks showed at the temples, Tomasa was bellowing as if she were being skinned alive. She was dying, she said. Those remedies of Cirilo's were no good. The only thing a played-out, useless old woman like her could do was to die in abandonment, like a dog.

These well-deserved reproaches touched Irurtia's heart. After all, this was a case of a self-sacrificing woman with whom he had spent all his life. He tried to soothe the old woman's spirit, since words were of no avail to soothe her physical pains.

"For God's sake, Tomasa! How you do carry on! Anybody would think you were a little girl crying for her mother who had died the night before. I don't recognize you. You, the strong one; you, the good one, the only person I love; you, the only one for whom I feel any affection, complaining now, believing me guilty of neglecting you, and that

you're going to die, just because that cursed rheumatism is clutching your limbs. Don't be so unjust; don't be a dolt; don't be so chicken-hearted."

If her rheumatism had vanished on the instant, leaving her as agile as a ballet-dancer and as aerial as a sylph, Tomasa could not have felt greater relief or deeper astonishment. She began to smile. Irurtia's words had proved her panacea. And in the midst of her first tears, which had not yet completely evaporated — through that laughing weeping or that weeping laughter, Tomasa, afraid lest she be defrauded of her rights, launched her complaint against Irurtia's recent conduct toward her.

"You don't care three straws that I'm going around on broken legs, almost helpless, ever since the devil introduced you into that Agualonga home."

In mingled vexation and kindness, Irurtia exclaimed:

"Don't be an ass, woman."

And in order to nip the quarrel in the bud and not allow any loophole even for allusions, he changed the subject.

After a while, he ventured:

"First thing tomorrow I'll fetch a doctor from the University — one of the kind you like — just to see whether the fellow can cure you in a jiffy."

"Fine!" said Tomasa, while her countenance betrayed a melancholy doubt.

"Fine, yes, fine! And you'd already be feeling fine if this Cirilo Matamoros hadn't gone crazy."

When Irurtia left the room, Tomasa was drying her two last tears; but these two tears had not been wrung from her by abandonment; they were tears

of gratitude. She made a special effort, and was able to rise. Irurtia, who from his bedroom could hear her limping clatter, asked:

"But Tomasa, what nonsense do you call this? What do you mean by getting up?"

And the old woman, from a heart that was always full of motherliness and self-sacrifice, replied:

"Do you imagine, Camilo, that I'm going to leave you without anything to eat? Not if I were dying!"

Irurtia, who had begun to take off his street clothes in order to dress for the house, in his oldest change of clothes, remained standing in meditation, holding his recently removed trousers in his hands.

Poor Tomasa! She really suffered terribly from this rheumatism. And to think that he had never given her a thought! How neglectful! The truth was that he had many things on his mind these days.

Irurtia would not admit to himself that Rosaura, or rather, his senile passion for Rosaura, was the sole cause of this relative disarrangement of his existence; but he confessed that she played a large part. He beheld himself cooped in a blind alley, or at least, one with but a single way out: marriage. He didn't care to think of this; it seemed silly at his age; and it seemed even more ridiculous at his age to be courting a woman who could not be his mistress and whom he had no intentions of marrying. This really was a blind alley.

And like everybody else whose mind is in a maze because of some overruling passion, Irurtia's thoughts rambled wildly amidst reason and unreason.

Not for a moment did this so wily man, despite so many suspicious maneuvers, suspect that Olga, Andrés Rata, General Chicharra, and, in a way, even Eufemia and Alcira, were in a plot to catch him. Had such a thing ever occurred to him, he would have made off at once and escaped the trap. But never did the remotest conception of such a suspicion occur to him. Even the banquet at Chicharra's seemed to him the most natural thing in the world.

Even half undressed as he was, with his shirt-tail falling over his drawers, his trousers in his left hand, standing in the center of the room with his eyes fixed upon the candle that stood on the lamp-stand, overlooking the fact that it was burning — that is to say, being wasted extravagantly — the lanky old miser fell to thinking of the dinner at the home of the famous General Chicharra.

He had worn a brand new suit to the banquet, the very same that he was now removing. He bought only a frock-coat and the trousers; the vest seemed to him to be a useless adornment; he would take care to keep his coat tightly buttoned; if worst came to worst, he could wear his old vest. Before he had purchased those two articles of clothing he had spent many a moment of uncertainty. And when, at last, he decided to buy them, he must indeed have felt that he was deeply in love and that he would surely find Rosaura Agualonga at the Chicharras' — although nothing of the sort had been said to him. And at that, before plunging into this wild expenditure, the skinflint had tried to cleanse his old cloth suit with benzine; the stains

disappeared only in spots, here and there; but the frayed elbows, the patched lapels and the tattered lining — how were they to be restored?

He appeared in his brand-new suit. They placed him opposite Rosaura. With her eyes almost fiery red, as if from much weeping, she scarcely opened her lips, remaining silent and gloomy throughout the banquet.

But not on this account was the affair less animated.

The famous Chicharra, brimming with good humor and eloquence, gave reminiscences of his campaigns and recalled, in disinterested fashion, the services he had lent as a statesman. The stomach of the picturesque general swelled like a balloon, not only with pleasure, but with food, while the guests heard him attentively. His carbuncle nose, more rubicund than ever because of the Bordeaux wine, suddenly assumed a deep red color. This spherical Chicharra was delightful. He had been everything in Venezuela; everything except Archbishop and President. Andrés Rata, Olga Emmerich, the smiling, mischievous daughters of Chicharra — especially Tula — and even Alcira — were all glowing and happy; they all showered Irurtia with food and attentions, for it was in his honor that the banquet was being given.

After dinner, as accident — that diligent intermediary — would have it, Irurtia found himself alone with Rosaura in the little salon where Olga had just finished playing the piano and Tula had been singing like a mocking-bird. It was only for a moment — a lightning-flash — that this intimate

solitude lasted, for Rosaura, finding herself alone with Irurtia, hastened to leave; they said nothing to each other. . . . That moment, none the less, provided Irurtia with the most pleasant recollection of the evening. Why? He could not explain it. Silly matters of the heart. In addition, he realized very clearly that the never sufficiently estimated Chicharra and his wife, as well as Olga Emmerich and Alcira, had discovered — with what discretion! — the secret of his love; and — with what discretion! — it might be said that in a tacit way they approved his sentiments. This pleased him not through any vanity, but because he, who was so skilful and resourceful in matters of business, understood, in all sincerity, that he was in social and sentimental matters inferior to the most superficial and colorless fop.

This connivance and letting matters take their course which he discovered or thought he discovered in Rosaura's relatives, he, who was ordinarily so suspicious and unbelieving, did not impute to trickery, guile, plotting or an attempt to ensnare him. As to Rosaura, despite the tenderness and infinite benevolence of that generous soul, Irurtia divined, rather than felt, a certain asperity, repulsion, an obstacle, a lofty pride, that said to him: You shall pass no farther.

But this obstacle served only to infuse the militant don Camilo with new ardor. "No matter!" he told himself. "Women must be conquered! They are like all strong positions: the glory consists not in entering them but in capturing them."

Two weeks had gone by since the feast at the

home of squat-figured Chicharra; ever since, don Camilo came almost daily to the Agualongas, not as formerly to take them out on a tour of the houses that he offered them in exchange for their own, but on a visit to Rosaura, as a friend of hers — almost as her suitor. How had this custom come about? Little by little, like the most natural thing in the world. Rosaura would receive him in the parlor, alone, while Olga Emmerich would chat at the window with her sweetheart, or would converse with nobody, just staying there silent and wary, like a Lar, like a Hermes, like a Terminus in petticoats.

Still in shirt and drawers, with his new trousers in his left hand, the pensive Irurtia had sat down upon the edge of the bed, seeking mechanically a more convenient position for meditation.

Tomasa's voice roused him from his retrospective evocations:

"Come, Camilo. Have you fallen asleep? Supper's ready."

Don Camilo noticed that the candle had been burning wastefully: it had become a mere stub! And without finishing dressing himself, as quickly as a buck, he reached the lamp-stand and put out the light.

III

IN QUEST OF HIPPOCRATES

DON CAMILO raised his eyelids and little by little extended his limbs in the first stretch of the morning.

Daylight, filtering in through the grating, had changed the obscurity of the room into something that resembled light rather than semi-gloom.

He got out of bed and started to dress. While in the midst of his operations he loosened the catch-bolt of the window, and through the window, which was already open, penetrated a flood of light. There also penetrated a catarrhish cough: Tomasa's morning cough. And something else in addition invaded Irurtia's tiny room, together with the light of the morning and the mucous cough of the housekeeper: the song of a bird.

Don Camilo, surprised at the entrance of this unwonted twittering into his shack, opened the shutters wide and thrusting out his head saw upon the edge of a roof-tile that was covered with a greenish slime, a little red and black bird. The little chirper turned its eyes from one edge to the other, as if seized with fear; its interrupted song did not seem to proceed from astonishment or quarrelsomeness, but rather appeared to be a call or a signal: "Come, come!" or, "Here I am." Irurtia paused to watch the reddish black bird.

How pretty the creature was! If only the tile were daubed with bird-lime and he could catch the bird and keep it! The old fellow tried to whistle and even snapped his fingers with a vague idea of changing into a bird and also with the intention of deceiving the triller. When the fledgling caught sight of that hawk-like Irurtia, it fled abruptly from his presence, leaving his whistle on his lips and his fingers still engaged in their deceitful snapping; whether in mockery or simply scared, it flew away.

A few moments later Irurtia and Tomasa were having their breakfast, which, as usual, consisted of two cups of coffee flavored with liquor, and a couple of rolls at a *céntimo* apiece. Tomasa had spent a terrible night. She could stand no more. The damp breeze at dawn martyrized her.

"I no longer can walk," she complained. "I just drag along. Soon I won't be able to move from my chair or from the cot. How horrible, good God!"

For some time past she had been growing thinner, which could hardly have been believed possible of this human asparagus. Continuous suffering wrinkled her face more and more. Tomasa's skin, indeed, was tightly wrinkled about her bones. Her large Madras kerchief, red and yellow, tied around her head over the ever unkempt white shocks of hair, looked like a Spanish flag covering an uncarded bundle of cotton. Spain had gone to poor Tomasa's head.

While the old woman complained of her numerous pains, Irurtia inwardly wondered how it could have happened that he should not have noticed the

rapid decline in that woman's health. Tomasa looked like a skeleton! He justified himself with the exculpating thought: "Tomasa never complains!"

This sort of reasoning was nothing but a wile to deceive himself — to prevent his admission that an absorbing thought occupied his heart, — an idea that had taken complete possession of his spirit — and that a bandage had fallen over his eyes, as if, blinding them to surrounding things, it thus enabled them to see more clearly what was going on in the sequestrated internal world of the money-lender.

It is true that Tomasa did not complain every moment, particularly during the weeks directly previous, for she had in a certain way been wounded by Irurtia's indifference; but often she would breathe her complaint in this exclamation: "What is left of the Tomasa that used to be? A shadow!"

Irurtia reminded the old woman of the promise he had made her on the night before.

"Yesterday, when I came back from the street," he said, "I offered to have you examined by a doctor from Caracas — a University physician — the kind you like. Well, then, he shall come this very day. I'm going out at once to hunt one up for you."

And as one who carries out a self-imposed sacrifice, and hopes, at least, that it will be appreciated by the person for whom it is being made, he asked:

"Are you satisfied?"

Yes! Tomasa was well content with such a generous promise! All her faith in Cirilo Matamoros

had vanished like a cloud. She did not even care to hear the quack's name.

"Don't even mention that Matamoros to me, Camilo. I'll never take one of his medicines again or apply another leaf from his herbarium, not if I were to die. His filth hasn't brought me even a quarter of an hour's relief."

They rose from the table; she, now filled with the hope of a cure, or at least of an improvement; he, content with himself, and looking upon himself as one capable of disinterested, generous, knightly deeds.

He was already reading his *Noticiero,* which he had bought through the window, of a passing vendor, when the iron knocker sounded from the street door. It was Berroteran, the patient, diplomatic mason, who, according to the peons, had "sliced Irurtia's navel," because he never contradicted him, but rather, adapting himself to that temperament, had been able to win the suspicious fellow's confidence. His influence with Irurtia grew steadily, and steadily he thrust his own hand further and further into those affairs of the usurer that concerned the remodelling and the repairing of houses in Caracas.

No sooner had Berroteran entered than the knocker sounded again. The mason went out to open it, and in came a little girl of the neighborhood with an empty bird cage in her hand.

Timidly and awe-struck she began:

"I've come here to see if you won't do me the favor of finding out whether a house bird has been flying around here."

"Come in, my little girl," replied Irurtia, almost paternally; "look around for yourself. But you'll find nothing. . . . This morning there was a red and black bird flitting about on the roof . . ."

"That's the one."

"Well, it flew in the direction of those willow trees."

The little girl smiled her thanks for the information and went off toward the large yard — a dairy — where a dozen willow trees pointed their green fingers skyward.

Berroteran, who knew Irurtia so well, was thunderstruck, not alone by don Camilo's affability, but by the invitation the miser had extended to the girl to search the house, thus revealing his anxiety about the bird. Even when he left, the mason was still asking himself, as he sauntered along the sidewalk:

"What can be happening to don Camilo? He seems to be a different man!"

A half hour, at the most, after Berroteran's departure, Irurtia went out. He was going to hunt up a doctor for Tomasa.

When he arrived at the Plaza de la Candelaria he looked at the public clock: Nine.

Don Camilo paused for a moment. Which direction should he take? Which physician should he engage? The night before it had occurred to Irurtia to call in the services of some mediocre quack — some young fellow who had not been able to graduate and put on no airs; he would charge less. The worst of it was, he knew nobody. He thought of going to the University and getting some student;

but he hesitated; what were these students but a set of boobies and nincompoops? No; he didn't care to expose himself to student nonsense. Then he thought of the hospitals: an interne; that was it, some hospital practitioner — some studious, poor chap, who had already had some experience and not, like the University students, mere theory. Nothing better could suit his case.

He walked resolutely on for a few meters, intending to visit the Vargas hospital, when he paused again, his head bowed. The hospital was so far off! "Besides," he reasoned, "those chicks think themselves roosters already." And by means of such a figure don Camilo expressed to himself the opinion that a hospital practitioner could charge him almost as dearly as a regular physician.

It was then that he thought of good Cirilo Matamoros, and deplored the humble healer's failure to relieve Tomasa, as well as Tomasa's prejudices against the healer. What a pity, truly! For after all, Cirilo knew as much about rheumatism as the most expert physician. He was no fool, not by any means — this Cirilo Matamoros. The native doctor's successful cures could no longer be reckoned upon the fingers of both hands. Hadn't he himself, Irurtia, more than once entrusted himself to Cirilo? And hadn't Cirilo relieved him of all the pain and bodily suffering that had brought him to the *curandero?* Even more: Tomasa, the very Tomasa that now reviled Cirilo and can't bear the sight of him — wasn't she indebted to him for previous cures?

This inflexible prejudice of Tomasa against the

good countryman seemed most unjust to the money-lender; Matamoros, after all, did his best and gave all he could: his learning, his medicines, and gave them without pretense, without chaffering, gratis! Suppose he consulted Matamoros for the last time to find out whether he could cure the old woman — yes or no! After all, nothing would be lost by consulting him.

And since, in a man of such resolution, deciding a thing mentally always was equivalent to carrying it out — for Irurtia, a man of action, synchronized his thought and his deeds as far as was possible in so wily and suspecting a soul — Irurtia started walking down Candelaria Street, determined to make the house of Matamoros in the neighboring district of Chacao on foot.

"Only a moment ago," he thought, "the Vargas hospital seemed distant, for I hadn't made up my mind; now I dare to walk all the way to Chacao, and I'd go even further, without counting the leagues."

Indeed, he set out at a lively, energetic pace, covering block after block in joyous fashion.

After a brisk walk he came to a bifurcation of the avenue. The right leads to the central railroad station, while at the left the road turns off obliquely; by this oblique street one descends to the cottages of Quebrada Honda, and somewhat farther on, what began as a street finishes as a cart-road, the highway leading to Cabana Grande, Chacao, Petare and so on.

Irurtia had fully meant to make this little trip to Chacao on foot. But as he gazed at the dusty

road, the sun that was beginning to get hot, and considered the damage that would be done to his brodkins by such a journey, the time he would invest in going and returning, he recalled that the train, for some 50 *céntimos,* would take him thither, and for another 50 would take him back, all within an hour, and that, going by train, he would avoid fatigue, wear and tear upon his shoes, and the total loss of the morning in a road obscured by eddies of dust and baked by the noonday sun.

He chose the railroad.

When Irurtia reached the station it was not a train that was leaving, but an electric car.

He inquired at the ticket-office. As the price was the same for the train and the car, he took the car.

What a delightful ride in that open-air car!

The electric-car runs along, at first over a broken plain on which, here and there, may be seen the white farmhouses with their roofs of purple tiles.

On this uneven plain there die the foothills of the august Cordillera, a spur of the Andes, which separates the Caribbean sea from the valley of Caracas; and as the railroad runs along parallel to the mountain range, the noble range keeps the travelers continuous company. What charm that of those slopes through which, here and there, come roaring forth torrents that gleam in the sun, and which now and then permit glimpses of the cultivated land and the charred spaces that betray the criminal clearing of the ground.

Irurtia, though neither a painter nor a poet, as he had explained to that busybody Andrés Rata in a moment of ill-humor, had fixed his gaze upon the noblest summit of the range: the Silla de Avila.

When the car stopped, he was shaken out of his contemplation.

He looked around: they were at Sabana Grande. The houses grew fewer and fewer in number. To the right, between the highway and the railroad, the cottages, surrounded by vine-clad mudwalls and gardens in front, peered in groups upon the edge of the line; to the left, in the direction of the mountains, are seen amidst a grove of fruit trees, a white country house and a mill, whose snow-white wings beat above a profusion of green tree-tops, among which gleam golden oranges; the guava fruit with their rosy hearts are ripening and the dark guanabonas with their huge stomachs are refining their acid honey.

The car continues on its way through the fields. As it turns to the right, it runs at some distance from the mountain range amid cane haciendas and cornstalks; Irurtia looked from one side to the other; the green poles of the cornstalks and the flexible lances of the sugar-cane shone in the sunlight.

One more stop amid the fields, and then they arrived at Chacao.

The long-shanked Irurtia got off.

The center of the village was two or three minutes from the station. Don Camilo entered a lane leading to the hamlet — a cluster of scant dwellings parted in two by the cart-road.

The dusty highway covered with a thick, filthy, dull ochre hue the white walls of the cottages that are lined along the way; and these cottages, which were whitewashed and spotted with dust and rain,

appeared aged and decrepit, in marked contrast to the smiling, eternal youth of the country landscape.

But Irurtia eyed everything with an enchanted glance. After all, this was a veritable pleasure trip for him; he didn't commit such escapades every day. He must take full advantage of it and get all the benefit possible even though it were only with his eyes, out of the hamlet's white walls, green plantations and blue skies.

IV

THE FARM HAND'S ACCIDENT

DON CAMILO had little trouble in locating the country-doctor's *pulpería*. It was well known. The first person he asked directed him to it.

From the entrance and through the wide-open doors, or rather, through the open doorway, Irurtia catches sight of Matamoros in the section of eatables. Leaning against the counter, a pencil in his right hand and a sheet of paper before him, Cirilo is going over his accounts.

A little chap of fourteen or fifteen — surely his clerk — stands not far from Cirilo. They are not selling anything at that moment, for there is none to buy. A mule-driver has just left. The place is deserted.

Taking advantage of a warm gush of light, a heliotherapic dog is giving himself a sun-bath upon the brick pavement. With a sultanesque air, followed by a white hen and another of ashen hue, a spiny-footed *ganaguey* rooster with a scarlet crest and a conqueror's stride is parading along. The youthful clerk frightens away the flies: hither and thither he goes, waving a bundle of long paper strips tied to the end of a bamboo stick. The flies, flitting from one corner, settle in another. Little black dots denote their traces on the lamp tube.

When Cirilo Matamoros recognized don Camilo,

he swelled with pride, foreseeing the purpose of his visit. Too bad the place wasn't swarming with customers, as it usually did in the afternoon, when the peons stop working and foregather for a chat and to moisten their gullets with a swallow or more of brandy; or as in the early morning, when cooks and family servants of the neighborhood come in crowds for their daily purchases. A pity!

"Don Camilo! You here!"

"Yes, sir. Here I am."

"And how's the sick lady getting on?"

"Same as ever. No improvement. That's why I've come."

"Why didn't you call me up on the telephone, don Camilo? You know that I'd have come as fast as lightning."

"Many thanks. I wished to come in person. I'll explain."

Don Camilo surveyed the store. It was no mere shanty. Matamoros must have a little money. "How much can this *pulperia* be worth?" Irurtia asked himself. And in order to learn whether the stock sold quickly, he questioned the owner:

"You have an excellent supply. Do many people pass on the road? That is, many customers?"

As for passing, plenty passed. But as for stopping, that was another song. Cirilo went into details. Few indeed stopped at his place, with Caracas only a step away.

"Then the neighbors, the peons, the people from the *haciendas,* must patronize you. . . ."

Matamoros continued his information.

The peons were the support of the house. As for

the wealthy neighbors, they ordered everything from Caracas, by wholesale. Nevertheless, Matamoros had no right to complain. The traffic on the highway was so continuous that some business was always sure to turn up. The river carries so much water that some of it drips into the hamlet.

While Cirilo Matamoros continued his chatter and showed the place to Irurtia, Irurtia, in a jiffy, had taken a mental inventory of the store.

The counter, which was of wood painted gray and covered by a sheet of zinc, nailed with copper tacks: 200 *bolívares.*

On the counter a balance with copper plates; near the scales, a roll of leaf tobacco; a huge tin can of ground coffee; and further on, near the end, two glass cases, one filled with sweets and cheap pastry, the other with articles or rows of dry-goods: 200 *bolívares.*

The protruding shelving or frame-work at the bottom for foodstuffs and other goods, with the small square compartments, each identical; and the back with its horizontal, parallel subdivisions: 250 *bolívares.*

Each subdivision or shelf of this back contains objects distinct from those of the parallel subdivision below or above. Thus, one shelf exhibits sardines, small pease, salmon, large oysters, all sorts of preserved goods: 150 *bolívares.*

Another contains liters, bottles and half-sized bottles — that is to say, oil, vinegar, wines, liquors: 150 *bolívares.*

In the next are glass-ware and earthen-ware: vases, stew-pots, ladles, pots: 60 *bolívares.*

In the next, candles, matches, cigarettes, tobacco: 60 *bolívares.*

On the floor, or upon stands, sacks of Indian corn, beans, kidney-beans and rice open their wide mouths; dried cod lies like yellow parchment; the spotted morays lie under leather lids; cans of kerosene are heaped up together with little cases of spaghetti, macaroni and other Italian dainties: 1,000 *bolívares.*

From a beam hang, like dried serpents, strings of garlic and rows of onions; and from the wall, bunches of machetes, pruning-hooks, gardeners' hoes and other field tools: 200 *bolívares.*

Here and there may be seen nails, *guaimaros,* a hammer; packages of firecrackers, bunches of skyrockets, balls of *cabuya:* 50 *bolívares.*

On the top shelf, almost touching the roof, presides the harness wear, like adventurers who have been raised by accident to the most exalted position, rolls of halters and headstalls, cruppers, packsaddles, a pair of tailor's gooses and a portable furnace: 500 *bolívares.*

In addition, Irurtia noted, on a low table, within reach of the hand, wide-mouthed bottles: these contained the brandy for the peons — sugar-cane brandy, white, transparent; *cucuy* brandy, pink; brandy with mint and water-cress, green. . . .

And he noticed also two huge cheeses that reared their bulk upon a smooth table; they were already wounded by the slashing knife: the one was Maracay cheese, fresh and milky; the other was of cheaper and harder sort — a cheese from the Plains. Not far from the cheese was a tin can with bulging sides,

filled with Yankee butter that had already begun to be sold at retail — that is to say, oleomargarine, which is to say, that canned poison which the Yankee does not care to consume in his own land of Porkopolis, but which he exports to the land of imbeciles. This Yankee butter, a cluster of bananas and both cheeses were worth, according to Irurtia's estimate, not very much — a matter of some 70, or perhaps 80 *bolívares.*

Don Camilo recapitulated: "I may be mistaken in this or that estimate, for I'm no merchant; but Cirilo Matamoros has here in the vicinity of three thousand *bolívares'* worth of stock between his foodstuffs and his tools."

Then he thought: "He must have got them on credit from some business house in Caracas: surely from some wily German dealer. They must have charged him from 50 to 100 per cent more on each article, under the pretext that they were giving it to him on credit; in addition to that, those that are sold by weight must be fraudulently weighed. So that this fellow is obliged to pay for this three thousand *bolívares'* worth of stock in the neighborhood of seven thousand, if not more; which is to say, he'll have to work forever, if he continues in such a ruinous line, in order to enrich the Germans and the other vampires of Caracas."

After having carefully showed the shop to Irurtia, Cirilo led him out.

He took him through a door at the side which communicated with the family's dwelling. Don Camilo suddenly found himself in a village parlor.

The house, despite its rustic, countrified characters, was by no means bad; it was none of your palm-leaf hovels nor your Indian's huts with a thatched roof, nor an Uncle Tom's cabin; it was a pretty little home, all of rough stone and mortar. Order and comfort were everywhere evident. One could see the unmistakable signs of a woman's industrious hand. Don Camilo, partly through courtesy and partly through curiosity, said:

"It's a pretty house. How much can such a place be worth, friend Matamoros."

Cirilo told him the value. The old Shylock, knowing that the property belonged to the grocer, exclaimed:

"Now you see how a fellow can get rich in Chacao."

"It was inherited from my father," replied the other."

"Ah! Inherited?"

"Yes, sir. The same as the little field behind the house; about ten thousand square meters."

They sat down in rockers of wood varnished yellow, before a table varnished a dark color. From within came the indistinct voice of a woman. Matamoros, eager to come to the medical point, asked as soon as they were seated:

"Very well, don Camilo. What's the matter with your sick woman? How can I be of help?"

"Tomasa's not getting on at all."

"But is there any special symptom? Is she failing?"

Instead of answering, don Camilo asked a question:

"I want you to tell me, in all truth, friend Matamoros, if you really feel equal to curing Tomasa."

A man of science would have hesitated before replying. He would have thought, not of rheumatism as an abstract ailment, but of sick Tomasa —of Tomasa's rheumatism, which might be complicated with such and such a condition peculiar to the individual patient. But not Cirilo Matamoros. He thought of the malady, not of the one that suffered from it; of rheumatism, not of Tomasa. He knew by heart all the resources of creole pharmaceutics which cured that particular ailment or relieved the pain; he had applied them a hundred times with success, and he exclaimed, roundly and boastfully:

"Can I cure it? I should say I can! Whether I know rheumatism and how it is cured! Whether I have cured any rheumatics! Why, just look: doña Josefa Linares, of Caracas, had a servant who . . ."

He was about to plunge into references. Irurtia interrupted him, exultantly:

"Just what *I* said! Matamoros knows as much about these matters as anybody else. He could make the very lame walk, and fit disabled arms so that they could fell wild bulls by twisting their tails."

Then Shylock Irurtia explained minutely to the native doctor that Tomasa suffered such and such pains at such and such hours, that she could hardly make such and such movements, that the cool of the night and the cold air of the morning tortured her, that she was getting thinner every time you looked at her, that she had lost confidence in

Matamoros's remedies, and that he himself, don Camilo Irurtia, yes sir, don Camilo Irurtia in person, who was such a partisan of Cirilo, had been almost tempted to have recourse to some professional with an academic diploma. This idea of coming to him for a final consultation had saved the situation. He would leave in a peaceful frame of mind, without giving another moment's thought to doctors or medicines, for he had implicit faith in Matamoros' confidence, in his practical knowledge and his herbal remedies.

Cirilo could not recover from his astonishment. He could see, with retrospective vexation, that this patient had been on the point of escaping him! And he without so much as suspecting it! Thus do misfortunes arrive, without announcing themselves. Cirilo's thick eyebrows seemed to lower more and more, imparting to the poor man's countenance a tragic aspect.

Out of a feeling of gratitude toward don Camilo, and through love of his native pharmaceutics, as well as to display his learning and raise his prestige in Irurtia's eyes, Cirilo Matamoros arose and invited Shylock to follow him.

"Just come over this way, don Camilo. You'll see for yourself whether I possess the means of combating rheumatism."

Don Camilo wavered; he thought himself lost. Imagining that Matamoros was about to inflict a lecture upon him, he declared:

"My time is limited. I shouldn't care to miss the next train."

Cirilo, inflexible, would listen to no excuses.

There were trains at every moment. Don Camilo would not lose much time.

"Come," he repeated enthusiastically, his look tragic, his air determined, and his general bearing more lugubrious than ever. Come, and then you'll tell me whether I can or cannot cure rheumatism. . . ."

He seemed to issue a challenge.

"Not only rheumatism, but mange, syphilis, yellow fever, marsh-fever, typhus . . ."

Don Camilo found it impossible to break away and followed Matamoros into the inner part of the house. Matamoros, as he advanced, did not stop talking; his eyebrows bristled, his hair stood up straight like a brush, his glance was truculent, his aspect ferocious:

". . . yellow fever, marsh-fever, typhus, scarlatina. . . . I have cures for everything. The only thing in which I may be mistaken — like everybody else, even the most learned — is in the diagnosis. There are certain diseases whose symptoms resemble those of other diseases. And since the patient doesn't say to you, 'I have typhus, or malaria, or yellow fever,' a fellow is hard put to know which saint to commend himself to, and which remedy to prescribe. In the case of some illnesses, such as *carare*, it is the best way: that's clear. With dysentery, for example, I never make a mistake. . . ."

"Yes, that can be smelled," said Irurtia.

"It can be smelled and can be recognized," affirmed Cirilo, without abandoning his air of a veritable Moor-slayer,[12] although at bottom he couldn't kill even a fly. . . .

[12] A pun upon the literal meaning of Matamoros' name.

"It can be smelled and be recognized. . . . In other cases I always ask myself, at first, somewhat at a loss: Can it be scarlatina? Can it be measles? Can it be syphilis? Cancer? But once I make sure of the malady from which the patient is suffering, zip! I prescribe the proper remedy and he is absolutely and irrevocably cured . . . unless God disposes differently."

They reached a tiny room with kalsomined walls; it was very light, having two windows that faced the fields. A simple row of unvarnished, unpainted pine shelves ran around the entire room.

In every compartment of the shelving stand rows of flasks, bottles, jars, flagons, even terra cotta stewpots, all, or almost all, bearing labels.

There is also in the room a strange piece of furniture full of little boxes, or drawers. Within each box or drawer, every one of which bears its specifying inscription, are heaped up leaves, barks and roots of trees, withered plants, dead flowerets and fruits long dried.

On the floor, and hanging from ropes, are seen plants, still green or hung up to dry. Little canvas or linen sacks and leather bags exhibit paunches filled with seeds, silks and tubers.

Upon a table at the rear is a delicate little balance; on another table of stouter fibre sleeps a mortar with its mouth wide open, while the pestle and the knife rest against its rim.

Under this second table are ranged bottles and flasks, and before the battery of flasks and bottles, like an officer before his company of soldiers, a demijohn swells with peacock pride.

An indefinable odor, a strange commingling of the pharmacy and the open fields, is exhaled by that room.

There lacked only the flagons filled with colored water and illuminated by a lamp from behind, and the inevitable tape-worm in alchohol, for don Camilo to believe himself inside of a town apothecary.

Matamoros, enjoying in advance the surprise that he knew he would produce upon Irurtia with all this array of drugs, which was arranged in as good order as the shop itself, if not better, stopped suddenly in the center of the room, and extending his arms about him in a circle, exclaimed with manifest and legitimate pride:

"Just look, don Camilo!"

His sinister air had almost disappeared. Matamoros, the formidable Matamoros, was smiling and content. Even the wiry hair of his dark head seemed less stiff.

Don Camilo expressed his wonder.

"This is a regular pharmacy!" he said.

"I should say so! There's everything here; what you'd call everything. And see the order that's kept: here are the caustics; here, tonics; here the antispasmodics; here, the sudorifics; here, the febrifuges."

At every name, Cirilo pointed with his index finger to a section of the shelves and to the generic label attached to each section.

Almost compelled by the native doctor, don Camilo inspected the various labels, reading names and deciphering inscriptions: Narcotics or sedatives; Emmenagogues; Emollients; Tonics or febrifuges;

Purgatives or cathartics; Dissolvents, fundents or resolutives; Drastics; Diuretics; Expectorants or pectorals; Sternutatories . . ."

Wearied of this tedious inventory, don Camilo interrupted Cirilo, saying to him with mingled irony and discretion:

"Friend Matamoros, how is it that with so many emollients, fundents, narcotics and emmenagogues, you haven't made a new woman of Tomasa?"

"We're coming to that, don Camilo. I can follow only the prescribed course. The rest is the work of nature."

And approaching a corner of the shelves, he added, indicating various objects one after the other:

"Do you see these pink flowers, this fruit skin and that bark?"

Without waiting for any reply, Cirilo went on:

"They are the bark, skin and fruit of the *copey*. The skin and the bark are marvellously effective against rheumatism. You brew them and apply them in local baths. The first thing I used for Tomasa was the skins. They weren't successful. Then I tried the bark. At the same time I gave her *bucare* leaves as well as spudge leaves to place against her temples as a cure for her headaches, which bothered her so frequently; and since such headaches may also come from the stomach, I gave her purgatives — sometimes cassia fistula and other times injections of *guamacho*."

"But she's certainly not getting better, friend Matamoros."

"We must give Time time. Medicines don't show their effect in a single day. Tomasa's rheumatism

isn't a matter of yesterday. Then how do you expect it to be cured in a wink of the eyelash?"

"I ask only that she be made well. The sooner, the better. Tell me, doesn't there exist any other anti-rheumatic agent than *copey* — something that Tomasa might try?"

"I should say there did. The *mato* root."

"*What* root?"

"*Mato* root. And something even better."

Don Camilo was astonished to think if there were any better treatment for rheumatism than *mato* and *copey,* Cirilo had not preferred to use it in Tomasa's case. Innocently, he remarked:

"Of course you don't possess that wonderful remedy."

Cirilo pointed to the same shelf upon which stood the *copey* and exclaimed, radiantly:

"This is the wonderful remedy."

Irurtia opened his clear, sharp eyes avidly. His hands of prey contracted like a falcon's talons, ready to pounce.

"And what the devil is this?" he asked.

Cirilo entered into details.

"This is the fruit of the tree called *cereipo,* and called also *guatemare. Guatemare* is not known in the center of the Republic; it's a tree that grows only on the mountains of Caroni, in our Guayana."

"And you have the fruit here?"

"I ordered it through the Yuruary Territory. They send it to me from Guacipati through the firm of Blohm. It costs money."

Irurtia itched to have Cirilo give him at once the *cereipo* or *guatamare* from Caroni.

Cirilo smiled before the long-shanked Shylock's ignorant presumption and said to him in a doctoral tone:

"This must be prepared. In its present state it's of no use whatever."

"Then prepare it."

Then, thinking that the preparation of the *cereipo* or *guatemare* might take a long time, and that Cirilo would pitilessly take advantage of it to inflict a lecture upon the entire Venezuelan pharmacoepia, he corrected himself:

"Although, the deuce, it's too late now."

And trying to be affable toward Matamoros, he added:

"It's too late now . . . and it would be better for you not to trouble yourself at present."

"Oh, it's not the slightest trouble for me," replied Matamoros. "But the preparation is a slow matter. Just remember that I must make a tincture with rum as a base, for Tomasa to take in doses of fifteen to thirty drops. I'll also apply the *cereipo* as a massage, to procure still better results. You must understand that I favor attacking the diseased organ directly and unwearyingly. That's the way. If an arm hurts, get right after the arm. If it's the stomach — to the stomach, then! You understand."

"I believe I do."

Don Camilo was anxious to leave. Knowing already how Tomasa was to be cured, he no longer had any interest in remaining in the grocer's home. But Matamoros, inexorable and scientific as he was, was not going to let slip through his fingers such

an opportunity to display his learning and his efficacious plants:

"Just step closer, don Camilo. Look: this is what's called *curta.* Drunk as an infusion and applied as a catapalsm, it cures syphilis."

"This," he continued, inexhaustibly, pointing to a packet — "this is taken with brandy, after grinding the leaves; it's *onoto:* a cure for *tabordillo.* For jaundice you have these yellow flowers that are still so odorous although they are withered. They, too, come from Guayana. The tree that produces them is called *carnestolendas.*"

Irurtia pulled out his watch. Matamoros pretended not to see. He placed his hand upon a wide-mouthed bottle that had originally served to contain olives and was now filled with a dry plant, and continued his pharmacological explanations in minute, conscientious, terrible manner:

"This plant is *borrajon;* it is also called, in certain parts of Venezuela, *hawk's bill* or *hen-parrot.* It looks like the heliotrope, and abroad they commonly call it heliotrope of the Indies, or Indic heliotrope. If you add a little salt to the juice of this plant, it cures the mange. The same plant, as an infusion, helps piles . . ."

A woman's voice began to call from a distance.

"Cirilo! Cirilo!"

It was Matamoros' wife. He pretended he was deaf, just as a moment before he had made believe blind. Here he was busy with his visitor and yet they inconsiderately interrupted him for some ridiculous reason, no doubt. What a bothersome woman!

Irurtia, impatient and biting his nails furiously,

tried to take advantage of this opportunity to escape from this downpour of practical medicine.

"Friend Matamoros," he began, "they're calling you. Don't let me take up your time. Answer. Please do me the favor to answer."

Cirilo assured him that it was merely some nonsense on his wife's part, and without the loss of a moment he continued his lecture to Irurtia:

"There are certain plants that produce their effect only when they are fresh. The *higuerote,* for example, whose resin or milk, if it's applied when fresh, pulls out a tooth by the root better than any dentist."

"I know that," said Irurtia, "and at times it takes out even two, . . . against the patient's will."

Matamoros heard himself being called anew, and anew he pretended not to hear:

"For certain women's troubles I've used this *mato* root with great success, as well as fermented *carato de maguey* or a simple brew of *cocuiza,* adding to it, of course, *brusca* root. Concerning diuretics, I have . . ."

Matamoros was unable to go on. They were knocking at the door violently. In high dudgeon he went out to answer. His wife, in an anxious voice, informed him:

"It's a laborer they've brought; he met with an accident. There he is, at the street door."

As if by magic, Matamoros' countenance and entire aspect changed. His troglodytic face suddenly began to beam with an almost beatific expression. A wounded man; perhaps dying. What luck.

He ran toward the street door, without paying the

slightest attention to Irurtia, leaving him standing there in the drug room, without a word of excuse or explanation.

The wounded victim was a young man, a denizen of Chacao. He was there with his mother.

No sooner had she caught sight of Matamoros than the old woman whined:

"He sliced off two of his fingers with a blow from the machete while cutting down corn stalks for his horse's fodder. A terrible thing; see what you can do, Cirilo."

Matamoros asked the old woman and the sturdy youth to enter.

He began to undo the bandage — a handkerchief saturated with blood — and the wound came to view: the index finger, struck obliquely and forcibly, had been left pointed, like a pencil. The thumb and the middle finger were also wounded. What a stroke of the machete!

"Any artery, Cirilo?" asked the mother.

Cirilo's only reply was to shout:

"Water . . . a sponge . . ."

They fetched a metal basin filled to the brim with water; the sponge lay within, like a floating island.

Attracted by the tumult, Irurtia entered at the point when Cirilo, surrounded by his wife, a servant, the farm hand's mother, and two or three curious bystanders who had come in, was bathing and probing the wound. Egotistically, he tried to make off in the confusion, alleging some previous appointment as an excuse not to witness the suffering of

another: for this compelled him to think of his own suffering, and he even imagined that it was his severed veins that were spurting blood.

"You are very busy, Matamoros. Allow me to . . ."

Don Camilo's respect for the native healer increased by leaps and bounds every second, not to speak of the contagious effect of the respectful confidence with which the rest of the group watched the doctor. On his own part, Cirilo paraded his authority before the bowed heads of the surrounding persons, heads bowed before the beneficent science of the country physician. Wherefore, treating the money-lender as if he were any ordinary person whom he had always respected, he replied:

"Allow you to go? No, sir, don Camilo: I allow you nothing. I'll take you down to the station. This is merely the matter of a moment. Do you see this bleeding giant chap? Well, you'll see him well in a second."

The wounded fellow didn't move an eyelid. His mother, who was eager to give all the details of the accident, finally grew silent.

Matamoros gave an order to his wife:

"See here: bring me that little flask containing the tincture of *aporó;* you know where it is."

As soon as the little flask was brought, the *curandero,* zealous and happy, let fall several drops upon the injured members.

The blood continued to flow.

After a minute of two in which the blood gave no indications of stopping, despite the *aporó* balsam, Cirilo Matamoros went in person to his drug room.

Thence he returned, a moment afterward, with his mortar in his hands.

At the bottom of the mortar were heaped some rare leaves, purple above and shining below. They looked almost fresh. He began to pound them before the gaping mouths of the confident gathering, repeating to the laborer, whose left hand still dripped blood:

"You'll see; we'll stanch that flow in a moment."

"And will he be left without the use of that hand?" the mother ventured to ask.

Cirilo shrugged his shoulders undecidedly, and was unwilling to compromise himself by a reply.

The bystanders watched the cure in silence.

Matamoros continued to pound away. Soon, without ceasing to pound, he said to his wife:

"Woman, fetch me some lint."

But something must have occurred to him, for he added:

"Don't bring it here, bring it to the medicine room."

And ordering his patient to be raised he went with him to the room that was stocked with his pharmaceutical plants. He asked Irurtia to come along; but only Irurtia. The old man, though much against his will, obeyed, for there was no loophole for escape.

The rest of the bystanders, whose curiosity had been disappointed, envied him this honor.

They began to indulge in commentaries.

Why had Matamoros resolved to leave with the wounded man and not perform his cure right there, in everybody's presence, just as he had begun to do?

Was it because he did not wish the mother to witness the operation? Had he been offended by some piece of impertinence? Nobody had said a word. Nevertheless, Matamoros had seemed to have been seized with a sudden anger. Although who could say what to expect from a fellow like Matamoros? When he seemed most sullen he was in reality in the best of humor.

The truth is that Cirilo, as he had left, looked like a veritable demon: his eyes were fairly concealed behind his bushy eyebrows, and his hair stuck up aggressively above a face as fierce as that of an Algerian pirate.

A few minutes passed.

At last the husky laborer appeared with his arm in a sling; behind the herculean chap came Matamoros and don Camilo.

Irurtia, sincerely impressed with Cirilo's art, wished to know the name of the plant with which he had realized the cure.

"It's called *suelda-con-suelda,*" the healer informed him.

Irurtia left filled with the conviction of Matamoros' competence in pharmacological, therapeutic and clinical matters.

When it was already quite late and the sun shone down as hot as the very devil, don Camilo arrived hungry and sweating at his home, and launched at once into a complete tale of what had happened, relating to the old rheumatic woman in words of high admiration how Cirilo had stanched the hemorrhage; and he went into ecstasies of praise concerning Matamoros' stock of drugs.

"Tomorrow, or the day after," he concluded in tones of assurance, "Cirilo Matamoros will bring health to you in a little flask of tincture. It's a marvelous plant that comes from Guayana and costs a fortune. This time I haven't the shadow of a doubt. Matamoros will restore you to health."

Tomasa shook her head skeptically. She even permitted herself a few words of doubt; but as Irurtia insisted, and as she had spent her life in believing in Irurtia, in obeying him and admiring him, the withered old woman was silent and even felt hopes of a cure revive in the recesses of her soul. Matamoros could cure her. Why not? God is so good!

V

WHAT THE ATTACHÉ OF THE CHILEAN LEGATION KNOWS

IRURTIA and Rosaura are chatting in the Agualonga salon. Olga Emmerich remains in watchful silence at the window. In the corridor Eufemia and Alcira are sewing. The door that communicates with the corridor is wide open and there enters the murmur of the sisters' conversation. From a copper-wire cage that hangs from a transom between two pillars, not far from Alcira and Eufemia, comes the chirping of a canary bird. It is five in the afternoon.

The money-lender is furious. Within forty-eight hours the Santa Teresa house will be vacated and ready for the Agualongas, who are to move in; forty-eight hours more, at least, will be required for the final coats of paint to dry. "In short," repeats Irurtia, "four days, and the removal is not yet arranged for."

And not only was the removal of the Agualongas to the new place as yet not arranged for; not even the date of Olga's wedding had been set — a ceremony which, according to the wishes of the Agualongas, must be celebrated in the old family mansion, before abandoning it forever.

Irurtia, in a talkative mood, complained to Rosaura at this tortoise pace.

"Such hurry at the beginning, and see now. With the matter already settled you postpone it out of sheer neglect, indolence, for no reason at all."

"Everything in due season, don Camilo. What difference does it make to you," answered Rosaura, "whether we move one day sooner or later; whether Olga marries today or tomorrow?"

Irurtia cannot understand why Rosaura should not understand.

"What difference does it make to me! But doesn't it occur to you that certain interests are at stake — *my* interests?"

"*Your* interests?"

"I should say so. We've concluded a bargain — you and I — haven't we? Well, this piece of business has caused me expense — great expense — so that I might give you a decent house."

And lowering his voice, the miser adds:

"God knows that it was for your sake that I consented to it all."

Rosaura permits no such words to be addressed her.

"That's nonsense, señor Irurtia. I really believe you're trying to provoke me, and you're succeeding very easily. If you agreed to the exchange it was because it profited you, and not for my sake. I was an utter stranger to you. Besides, I wouldn't have accepted then, nor would I accept now, any sort of favor other than that of the mere courtesy which any gentleman could show to any lady."

Realizing that he has put his foot into it, Irurtia breaks forth into more or less clever excuses. Anybody who could see deep into his heart would dis-

cover there sentiments of respect and admiration, of sympathy. . . . The Agualongas . . . especially Rosaura. . . . In short, he could feel far better than he could speak.

"Indeed. Just like a schoolboy."

"Don't poke fun at me."

"I'm not poking fun! But your urging us to move into the new place at once, and your invoking your interests, deserves as much."

"Not so. If you don't move soon, you place me in a difficult position, for I can neither rent nor sell the Santa Teresa house, in which I've invested a considerable sum, more than I would have done in case other persons than you were concerned in the proposition. That money, then, will yield not a *céntimo,* paralyzed as it must be for days and days."

Don Camilo purposely embroiled the matter. He was anxious to have the old manor of the Agualongas as soon as possible. And he finished by declaring to Rosaura:

"As to this house that is to belong to me from the day you vacate it — neither can I dispose of it while you still occupy it. Now you can see whether the delay in your removal is doing me harm."

Rosaura placed little credence in Irurtia's tale of the harm being done him, nor did she give much heed to his explanation; but in order to avoid a new series of vexing details, she permitted herself to be carried off by that very feminine characteristic of skirting difficulties instead of boldly meeting them and settling them, exclaiming:

"You'll have a little patience, señor Irurtia, for you're a kind person."

"Very well. But kindness doesn't mean wasting time and losing money, or missing opportunities to make it — which amounts to the same thing — with no advantage to me, to you, or to anybody else. A man who'd do a thing like that is neither good nor bad; he's incapable."

When, a little later, Irurtia left, between six and half-past, Rosaura and Olga went out to the corridor, where Alcira and Eufemia were still conversing, watching the gathering shadows fall upon the trees in the *patio*.

The niece then went off to her rooms. Rosaura, Alcira and Eufemia began to discuss Irurtia's attitude, his pressure upon them to move, and the reasons for his insistence.

They called Olga:

"Olga, come here; listen to something that interests you."

When Olga suspected what they were about to discuss, she tried to escape, replying with a jest:

"Ugh! Family council? I'm superfluous, in that case. I approve everything you say in advance. De Anti-mano. In advance."[13]

Antimano is the name of a little place near Caracas. The play on words was not only puerile, but utterly silly. Nevertheless the sisters received it with applause. That Olga was certainly witty! But they would not let her escape; and Olga, without paying any attention to the matter that was so worrying her three mothers, replied in a burlesque manner:

"What do you want? To hold a conference?

[13] A pun on *de antemano*, i.e., beforehand.

Let's confer, then . . . in the dark, if you like, although I'd prefer to have this corridor-lamp lighted."

Then she added:

"We're not in don Camilo's home, nor do we wish to imitate the *tenebrae* of Holy Week. That's what *I* think."

They gratified her desire. In order to lose no time by calling the simpleton daughter of the cook, Alcira, climbing into a chair, pulled toward her the bronze lamp that hung from the ceiling. By a sort of pulley mechanism the lamp was lowered. After being lighted, it returned to its customary position, thanks to a slight push from Alcira.

Still standing on the chair, Alcira exclaimed:

"*Fiat lux!* and there was light."

In the family not only did Olga create light with a word, even as the God of Genesis, but her will was law, even superior to the authority of Eufemia. But despite all her influence and all her wiles, she had been caught in a trap and could not evade that interview which she desired so much to escape.

After having urged the barter of the house more than anybody else, and with the absolute support of Eufemia, whose attachment to the ancient mansion inclined her to defer the removal to the new house as long as possible, Olga had suddenly, at the last moment, and without any apparent motive, begun to assure them that there wasn't any particular hurry.

"Since I must marry before we vacate this place, and since Andrés and I haven't yet agreed upon a

date for the wedding, why break our heads thinking of the removal?"

When the sisters urged her to take up the matter of the wedding with Andrés Rata, she pretended that Andrés Rata still lacked the household goods. The cabinetmakers' place where they were being made had not fulfilled the promise to have them ready at the time when they would be needed. This piece of furniture and that were still lacking.

What a bare-faced falsehood! Poor Rata had given no orders for furniture at all; he was buying up separate pieces here and there as he was able: one day the bedroom suite, another day the dining-room, a third day, the living-room.

How distinct from her story was the real reason! The truth was that Olga Emmerich had, a few nights previous, met the attaché of the Chilean Legation at a ball — he was a fine, handsome chap from Santiago, and had recently arrived at Caracas — and from the first moment she had begun a flirtation with him.

One flirtation more or less in Olga's existence, even at the very doors of Hymen, where she had already grasped the symbolic torch, or done what amounted almost to the same thing, surprised nobody. It was the most natural thing in the world. Caracas knew this, and smiled.

The young Chilean fell in love with this blonde, lithe woman, with her resilient breasts, her elastic muscles, her lips that thirsted for other lips, her alluring throat and arms, her proud head, her blue eyes, now gleaming fiercely, now submissive . . . And this woman with body and soul gluttonous for

pleasure — who dreamed ever of adventures across the seas with men distinct from the men of Caracas that she was always encountering, and all of whom she knew by heart; this wilful, sensual woman, egotistic to the very marrow; this woman utterly lacking in scruples, fell in love with the youth from Santiago, who, besides being a handsome young man, held her in the spell of the distant, the unknown, the romantic.

It was a galloping flirtation. Within ten or twelve days they met twenty times. And each time they met, now in one parlor, now in another, and most often at the home of that great intermediary Chicharra, they held intimate and unending converse. At the latest ball of the Chilean Legation, a garden-party, this lovers' chat became also a solitary promenade under the old trees and amid the most shaded unfrequented spots of a magnificent garden.

"This is my farewell to my bachelor days," she said cunningly, as if in self-excuse.

And she was able to permit herself this farewell flirtation, commenced upon the very eve of her marriage, because Andrés Rata, her sweetheart, belonging as he did by his not only obscure, but tenebrous origin, to one of the lowest strata of society, and having ascended only by means of politics, dwelt far from salons, and visited nobody with the exception of some unscrupulous cheap politician like Aquiles Chicharra.

The young Chilean pretended not to believe that Olga would marry Andrés Rata. She, so pretty, such a blonde, marry that ugly brute with such a

black body and black soul; such a misalliance would never happen in Chile.

The love affair and future union of Andrés Rata and Olga had a reason.

That daughter of a German, educated in a German school, inhaling in deep breaths the spiritual atmosphere of the overturned democratic society into which she had been born, had neither the sentiments, nor the ideas, nor the tastes of her three mothers — proud women, home lovers, pious, almost monastic, filled with ideas and sentiments that they were too weak to inculcate into the half-German maiden.

The influence of these mothers was nullified by their excess of love for their niece. They patterned themselves after Olga instead of Olga shaping herself after them. These three mothers were three ardent theological virtues confronting an iceberg — three abnegations before an egotism — three weaknesses before a single strength.

For this reason the Agualongas, who had always believed themselves the flower and the cream of society — women who even in the midst of poverty had never bowed their ingenuous pride before anybody or anything, and whose circle of relations was ancient, hereditary — were broadening their ideas, or, to put it more exactly and justly, were sacrificing their ideas for love of the girl. For this reason so many of Olga's schoolmates and their brothers had become regular visitors. And for this reason, too, Olga, with her hunger for pleasure and the necessity of consuming her excess of animal spirits, attended all society affairs. For this reason Olga,

ever since her fourteenth year, had been surrounded by swarms of lovers. For this reason Olga kissed her suitors behind the doors. For this reason Olga, escaping the surveillance of Rosaura, had become used to going out by herself, with girl friends who called for her or whom she went to call on in their homes. For this reason Olga was once surprised in the arms of a married man. For this reason Olga, convinced that no young man of Caracas who had the slightest respect for himself would venture to marry her, especially since she lacked a fortune, had accepted the hand of the servile, ambitious mulatto. For this reason her aunts wept copiously, ever so copiously, for nights at a time, before giving their consent. For this reason they consented to such a one-sided, uneven, absurd match.

The three mothers were by no means hopelessly silly, though their affection had converted them into their niece's puppets. They were by no means silly; they were far different from the half-German. Babel-like mentalities, they dwelt in intimacy without understanding each other. In reality the Agualongas hardly understood Olga: they could skirt the periphery of her character, and nothing more. Partly to exculpate the moody, capricious maiden, and partly in stupid admiration, the blind women would murmur, consentingly: "Olga is so original." Caracas spoke otherwise, with less euphemistic flattery.

Caracas had from the very first, with more perspicuity and justice than the three celibate mothers, seen the eagerness for attracting men that characterized this maiden of the snow-white, golden youth:

the excessive liberties lusted for by this blonde little beast who impatiently broke all restraining fetters; her glacial egotism, her leaning toward intrigue, and the morbid daydreaming of that creature who was so much more attractive outside than within.

In the fields of Venezuela, as soon as the golden grain begins to ripen, and even before, the parrakeets begin to swoop down in clouds upon the maize fields. The mouths of these garrulous, gluttonous little parrots is the first granary of the harvests. A popular refrain recalls this: "The first corn is for the parrakeets." Thus it was with Olga's suitors. Clouds of youths besieged the ripeness of her fourteen Aprils. The three mothers at first took the matter as a joke, looking laughingly upon the little hoyden and her court. Later, before the avalanche of rapidly following beardless suitors, they began to grumble:

"This can't go on," protested Eufemia.

Alcira and Rosaura chimed in:

"This can't go on."

"But they all do the same," was the reply they received from certain women of more liberal outlook.

Through fear of losing the affection of the wilful child by opposing her desires, the three mothers yielded, because "they all do the same."

Time went by. There came balls, and with the balls, new claimants, this time with mustache.

Then the Agualongas imagined that such fleeting love affairs of the window and the dance hall constituted merely an inoffensive sentimental amusement, a newly minted coin, a method of passing time without being bored.

Later on they became accustomed to it.

They were undeceived by Olga's betrothal to Andrés Rata. The news was as bitter as drinking hemlock, and they passed many a desperate moment. They rebelled with that soft bleating of the lamb who is being slaughtered. . . . All in vain; by the combined efforts of Olga and the scoundrelly Chicharra, Andrés Rata was imposed upon them. The three mothers could only weep and accept.

The wedding decided upon, they prepared to sacrifice everything they owned in order to provide handsomely for their niece.

They possessed but little; but the little they had was all for Olga. The suitor, who was now Olga's accepted fiancé, was so poor! What wouldn't the young couple need! And the three old maids even thought of laying something aside for a rainy day — not for themselves, but for the young couple. The mothers needed very little. Olga would take with her Rosaura's solid gold medallions, Alcira's old emeralds, Eufemia's cameos, as well as the Cubagua pearls, an heirloom that had been transmitted from generation to generation — in fact, all the old family jewels. And since all this possessed rather a sentimental than a cash or intrinsic value — since even the pearls deteriorated and died — it was agreed to sell the family mansion or exchange it for some smaller house with the object of receiving a respectable sum as compensation. In such a way Olga would be married off decently and they could give her in cash whatever was left after all expenses were paid; this could serve as a nest egg. Andrés Rata was so poor that Eufemia, referring to his desti-

tute, beggarly condition, would say, behind Olga's back, "He is really, not a Rata,[14] but a rat."

The sacrifice of abandoning the old home, both as a dwelling and as a piece of property, was the greatest that could have been inflicted upon the Agualongas.

All their family reminiscences were part and parcel of those walls, which had been reared by their ancestors at the beginning of the eighteenth century. The youth of the three women had been lived between those walls. Between those walls had dwelt their parents, their grandparents, their great-grandparents. Every nook evoked memories of such and such a personage of the family, remembrances handed down by pious tradition from child to child. "In that room So-and-so was born, in that other one, Such-and-such died. That tree was planted by this-and-that member of the family."

It was Eufemia chiefly who gave herself up to such evocations. She never left the house and spent her time sauntering through the corridors, which were as spacious as cloisters, or browsing in the garden — pale, sickly, with her flat nose, her ashen-hued hair and her suffering eyes — or flitting about from one to the other of the rooms whither the others never went.

She was, indeed, the living, eloquent soul of the ancient dwelling. To part with the venerable and beloved mansion caused Eufemia a hundred times greater grief than it did Alcira and Rosaura. Eufemia's sacrifice, then, was so much greater than that of her sisters. For this reason Eufemia, al-

[14] The literal meaning of *rata* is rat.

though she had proposed getting rid of the house for their niece's sake, kept postponing, with every wile and pretext she could summon, the date of the removal to Irurtia's house. But, as she herself put it, she had already "really made up her mind." Now she, too, urged prompt action. Let the poor little angel marry soon and be happy.

"I can't live very much longer," she would add. "An old invalid can die in any old place at all."

And less than anybody could Eufemia make out why Olga, on the very eve of her wedding, should not have the date set and should never mention the removal.

When, that afternoon, Rosaura spoke of Irurtia's insistence, the niece became angry and protested:

"What business has that ridiculous old fellow mixing into our intimate affairs? Let the hairy old lizard rather hasten to move out of his own lair."

"That's just what I asked him: who authorized him to meddle in our personal matters," explained Rosaura. "But he insisted. It seems that if he doesn't take possession of our house until the Santa Teresa one is ready, his interests will be jeopardized."

"Well, let his interests be jeopardized. What do I care about that crafty old miser!" burst out Mlle. Emmerich.

And after a sardonic pause, she repeated:

"Let him rather hasten to move out of his own lair."

Olga's erect, blond head rested firmly upon her shoulders in a characteristic attitude of defiance; her brows were knitted and her large blue eyes shot sparks.

The three mothers, on their side, wished to know definitely whether any date for the wedding could be set.

"I've said a hundred times," retorted Olga, in the worst of humor — "I've repeated a hundred times that Andrés still lacks the chief pieces of furniture, and that we must wait."

Then Eufemia, pale and with sunken eyes, turned to Olga and said:

"Let us wait, then. But I vow that I can't understand this tangle at all. A month ago you assured me that your household outfit was complete — that not even a chair was lacking. I can't begin to understand."

"You don't understand, aunt," replied Olga, "because you understand only eighteenth-century matters."

Irurtia was puzzled by the delay. Eufemia said that she could not begin to understand it. Neither Alcira nor Rosaura felt equal to explaining this equivocal attitude of Olga. Not even Chicharra, despite his pretensions as a politicaster, not even the emasculated Andrés Rata, despite his daily chats with Olga, could have clarified the mystery.

In order to solve this riddle it would have been necessary to consult that attaché of the Chilean Legation.

VI

THE PROTESTATION OF ALLEGIANCE

AQUILES CHICHARRA had been left without a government position. For two months already he had been agitating, visiting, intriguing and offering his services to the President, to the various ministers. . . . All in vain!

Four fortnights gone by without Chicharra receiving a solitary *céntimo* from the National Treasury! It seemed impossible! The first one to be astounded was he himself; and his budgetivorous[15] mentality judged that the government was failing him. This could not be.

Since his visits, his dancing attendance in the antechambers and his epistles burning with declarations of loyalty were equally useless, as were his offers of service and his outspoken, impressive petitions for any modest post whatsoever, "proportionate, of course, as far as possible, to the importance of such constant and long-standing services in the cause of the Liberal party," as Chicharra himself phrased it, Chicharra saw that he must resort to a coup.

What was Chicharra's coup to be? He knew by heart the thousand and one tricks that employo-

[15] An obvious coining of the author's, referring to a type of patriot not yet extinct in these United States, either; "feeding upon the national treasury."

maniacs always used, when, having gone off at a tangent and feeling themselves, by accident, left out of the Budget, they aspired to re-enter it.

He thought of organizing a powerful unification of the Great Liberal Party, and imposing it upon the government. When he communicated these notions to the other members of the party, they laughed right into his rubicund nostrils. The Liberals, who were more unified than ever, were running the country. Did Aquiles Chicharra imagine, because he was out of a public position, that therefore the Liberal Party had no voice in the government?

"There's many a Goth[16] holding public office," argued the famous Chicharra.

"Well, simply because there's many a Goth holding public office doesn't signify that liberal institutions have disappeared from the republic," they retorted.

They told him, moreover, that in order to work in the name of a party, it was necessary to labor with the acquiescence of that party, as a head or delegate of such and such a group.

Chicharra was provoked:

"I don't believe myself chief of the Liberals," he said, "although I don't lack the qualifications for the position."

Poor Chicharra, being as vain as he was, could not realize that he was never taken seriously and that he hardly served as a tool for the others; but this time it dawned upon him that the road he had set out upon would bring him to no public position.

Then he hatched up another scheme. He no

[16] Ie., conservative (*Godo*).

longer desired to unite the Great Liberal Party into a block that would impose itself upon the government; he planned to have all the Liberals of Caracas who were out of a position at the time sign a protestation of allegiance to the President.

After talking the matter over with them, Chicharra called them together at his home one afternoon.

All attended; and all, without a single voice of dissent, were in full accord. But a difficulty arose. At just what juncture should they make public this protestation of loyalty so that it should yield the best fruit?

"Any occasion at all," shouted Chicharra to the questioners. "The opportunity may be sought and found."

One of the adherents — an old fellow, caustic, satiric, and even more than these, loose-tongued and a wag — pretended naïveté, and asked:

"And what is the reason for this manifesto? The fact that we've been left without jobs?"

Chicharra waxed furious. Politics was no laughing matter.

"Do you imagine that merchants take business as a laughing matter, and that industrial men take industry as a joke? Our industry, our business, is politics. We can't convert it into a mere butt for jests. Where would we be then? Where could we go?"

The rest agreed.

"Really? Where could we go?"

"Why, we'd go somewhere or other, even to work . . . " insinuated the jester.

Another old fellow, grave, circumspect, asinine, a comrade and admirer of Chicharra, spoke up in order to blunt the sallies of the wag:

"Enough jesting for the present and let's get busy drawing up the document that we are to sign.

Whereupon Chicharra, in very dignified manner, and perhaps by previous arrangement with his friend, unbuttoned his frock-coat and extracting from the inside pocket a thick roll of manuscript, began to explain:

"I have taken the liberty of writing out this here . . . so as not to lose time or have to fall back upon improvisations."

Straightening out the roll, he added:

"This is a very well-considered document. Perhaps you would care to hear it, so that you may introduce certain corrections, if you think it necessary. . . . Although, frankly speaking, I don't think they'll be needed. I am so experienced in politics! Remember that I've been everything in Venezuela — everything except Archbishop and President."

They urged him to read.

Everything was ready beforehand. Chicharra stood at the door of the salon and at a mere sign a maidservant appeared as if through a trap-door, carrying a chair with a wooden seat: the kitchen chair. Chicharra tried to mount the chair, but was unable.

The wag of the party whispered into his neighbor's ear:

"Perhaps Aquiles is more accustomed to flirt with the maidservant than mount the chair. That's why he can't get on to it now."

He tried once more to climb; but he was afraid. The seat was too narrow and Chicharra — a huge belly upon two stubby legs — was altogether too wide in the paunch. He resolved to remain standing behind the chair, leaning upon the back so that the piece of furniture would suggest a tribune. He cleared his throat, glanced benevolently at his audience, pulled his crimson, carbuncle-like nose, shook his spherical abdomen, and wiping his lips with a handkerchief, began to read in a loud voice:

TO THE PRESIDENT OF THE REPUBLIC, CHIEF, CENTER AND DIRECTOR OF THE LIBERAL PARTY:

These are solemn days. We live in a historic moment. History contemplates us and Providence, like a loving mother guarding her children, watches over the land that gave us birth and over the Liberal Party that gave us civic guarantees and public liberties — pariahs that we were under the iron yoke of the impenitent conservatives whom the people, in its wisdom, calls recalcitrant Goths.

As Chicharra reached this part, his grave crony and admirer burst forth into stentorian applause:

"Very good! Very good! There's a man that calls a spade a spade!"

Chicharra turned his eyes gratefully in the direction whence the applause had come, and, conscious of his own worth as well as that of his work, said:

"You will see: this is a very well-considered document — very serious and of prime importance."

The nose of acorn, or the acorn of the nose, becoming congested with satisfaction, had in a second turned from coral pallor to scarlet.

Aquiles continued his reading, waving his arms as he did so and imparting appropriate tones of voice:

> *In past centuries, when man was ignorant of his rights, the monarchs ever imposed upon the serf of the glebe a ferocious, terrifying, bloody despotism, as lugubrious as the endless night of suffering in which were shed the tears of men, women, the aged and even the tender young. Nebuchadnezzar, Nero, Tubalcain, Philip II, Louis XIV and Ferdinand VII are examples that will not belie me, if proof were needed. Then came the Middle Ages with their horrors and darkness, in which humanity was rescued from complete annihilation only by the doctrines of Christ Crucified and the Cross that opened its arms like a celestial bird, above the abysses of blood, injustice and tears. Then came the French Revolution, which was the Tabor and the Sinai of the Rights of Man in society, and the monarchs — even the most innocent of them — perished on the scaffolds, and the guillotine severed the heads of the just and the sinners, until there glowed the dawn of modern liberties, of Right, of Civilization and of human Fraternity.*

Aquiles had reached this section of his speech, and was already excited and perspiring with his multiple historical evocations and his vast journey through the centuries, when one of the audience interrupted him:

"I don't see where all this fits in. Let those Greeks and Romans alone; forget the Middle Ages and the French Revolution, and let's get down to the present politics of our Republic."

"And especially our personal situation," inserted a certain carnivorous philosopher whose only concern was that of the belly.

Chicharra dissented from both opinions.

It was impossible to speak of each person's particular position. As for the historical citations, they were very much to the point in any public document, and would embellish it. In the present instance, they would impress the President, which was the main purpose of the paper.

"Moreover," he added, "I haven't been indulging in empty quotations. From the ancients I passed to the Middle Ages, from the Middle Ages to the French Revolution, the cradle of human rights. From that I'll proceed to the independence of our country, in order to depict the obscurantism that followed upon the first years of our emancipation, so that the Goths, conquered in every other part of the world, may be exposed attempting to appropriate our country as if it were a feudal possession, until in 1848 José Tadeo Monagas, in 1846 Juan Crisostomo Falcón and finally, General Guzman Blanco in 1870, forever rout the conservatives and mark the definite triumph of the Liberal Party in

Venezuela, which has since been governed by that party."

A staunch Liberal, who insisted upon exactitude, raised an objection:

"It would be more prudent to begin the history of ideas with José Tadeo Monagas."

The fellow who previously had been jesting now interjected:

"The document should state clearly that we brought about alternative government in Venezuela and that for this reason we've been governing the Republic since 1870."

Aquiles shrugged his shoulders, and his nose turned as red as a pepper. Good humor cast Chicharra into ill humor; a jest transformed him into a Fury. Solemnity is the elegance of a statesman.

Hereupon the philosopher of the stomach, almost in anguish, put in a word, seeing that everybody else was going astray:

"But look here! How about us poor Liberals who are left without a job? Where do we get off? Don't forget that when a fellow's famished, a bad beefsteak is worth more than ten ranches of cattle. Come to our aid!"

"I'll reply to every objection worthy of an answer," declared Chicharra, grave, important, resolute, and scorning the words of the jovial fellow as if the lowly thought of a position were furthest from his mind.

All began to speak at once. A demoniac clamor prevented Aquiles' promise from being heard. Then Chicharra, nervous and with a gesture of heroic reso-

lution, climbed up on that sort of kitchen tabouret with a back, in order better to dominate the unruly audience. He continued:

"The history of ideas cannot begin with José Tadeo Monagas. Never have I seen in any author, ancient or modern, Venezuelan or foreign, anything of the sort. What I *have* always seen is the procedure that I follow: Greece, Rome, Middle Ages, French Revolution, Independence of Venezuela, Goths and Liberals."

"Very well. And present-day politics? And what about us?"

"I repeat that I will answer all objections in defense of this document, which, even if it be mine, should not on that account be denied importance. Pay close attention, now. Get the kernel of my thought: from Guzman Blanco, who imposes Liberal ideas, procedure and men, I reach, in rapid review of all our administrations, our present President. I depict the latter-day situation in very bright colors. We, countless Liberals, separated from the Administration; in the meantime, countless Goths battening on the government. It's the knell of all reaction. The President of the Republic should surround himself with us, who are disposed to second his efforts; he should, with our aid, rescue the treasure of liberal doctrines."

Without allowing any time for fresh commentary and new interruptions, he said:

"Listen to the conclusion."

And he began to read hurriedly, almost without a pause for breath:

We repeat that the moment is solemn. Ultramontane obscurantism unfolds its horrible wings. Behold: the Goths swoop down upon the Treasury, occupy public positions, and from official heights, pretend — the madmen! — to stifle the noble sentiments of our beloved President, and to asphyxiate the liberal politics of so magnanimous, heroic, modest, civilizing and incomparable an Executive. They threaten to put an end to all the liberal conquests of which Venezuela is so justly proud: freedom of the press, freedom of industry, freedom of worship, abolition of the death penalty, gold standard, free and compulsory public education — which is not lay education in order not to offend the piety of our mothers, daughters and wives — and the other liberal conquests such as divorce and the security of our hearths, which we do not mention because they are so well known in the country that enjoys them.

Chicharra's admirer, who had already applauded him vociferously at the beginning of the speech, applauded anew, thoroughly convinced:

"Very good, Aquiles. That's what you call going to the point."

Chicharra's bulky paunch, in its own manner, though without undue noise, made a bow.

Raising his glance from the manuscript, Chicharra noticed that two or three persons had risen and were sneaking away.

"For God's sake, gentlemen, don't go yet," he cried in consternation. "The best of the program is coming now. Listen."

Nobody cared to hear any more. The audience, in the very midst of his reading, began to converse in loud tones, without paying the slightest attention to the tedious reader. For his hearers had become wearied, utterly bored.

Aquiles, pretending to notice nothing, continued to inflict his reading upon them. And now they really began to sneak out. Aquiles saw that he must make time, and still standing upon that kitchen rostrum, that tribunal chair, he continued to read more hurriedly than ever, at full speed, suffocated, sweating, exhausted. He found it difficult now even to hear himself. His skilful vocal inflections and shadings had disappeared. A monotonous patter, like that of rain, a muttering, like that of the pious woman who mumbles her prayers, resounded in those spacious precincts.

> *In view of the solemnity of the moment, convinced of the integrity, abnegation, patriotism, disinterestedness, talent, worth and all the public and private virtues that adorn our President, whose partizans we are, staunch, ever so staunch, loyal and unconditional, we offer him our collaboration in the great work of saving the ideas and the standards of the Great Liberal Party from the artful, paid assassins of the oligarchy, who sneak along in the dark, and like fanatic conservatives and recalci-*

trant Goths wish to acquire the rule of the nation and plunge us backward into the epochs of obscurantism. But this shall not take place while our beloved present President, elected by the people, continues to preside over the Republic and guide the Liberal Party to safety.

In this solemn and critical historical moment, in this epoch of important decisions, we are pleased, without any reservations whatsoever, before the eyes of the country and of the whole world, to protest our allegiance to the Government and to offer the President, unconditionally, our services as staunch partizans who approve all his official acts, past, present and future.

Long live our sole chief, the President of the Republic, illustrious American, restorer of our laws, great democrat and hero of duty. Long live the Great Historic Liberal Party! Down with obscurantism and oligarchy! Down with the Goths!

There was a thunderous outburst of applause, due chiefly to the joy of the hearers that the speech had come to an end. The orator with his handkerchief wiped the sweat from his face.

Deeply stirred, Chicharra's admirer lurched forward toward the tribunal chair to be the first to embrace the famous general. Unfortunately Aquiles, as he bent over, lost his balance and fell paunch downward to the floor.

Choking with laughter and trying to hide their hilarity, the guests surrounded him:

"Did you hurt yourself?"

"Do you want a glass of water?"

"A little arnica would do you good."

"Have a drink."

But Chicharra, superior and indifferent, cut short all questions and exclamations:

"It's nothing, gentlemen. In such a solemn moment, on a day such as today, fraught with gravity for Venezuelan liberalism, we cannot occupy ourselves with nonsense. If I fall and die, no matter; others will follow in my tracks."

And he invited all present to sign the document he had read.

The selfsame gentleman who had previously requested him to let all the Greeks and Romans rest in peace, now proposed that they should all sign the manuscript, after suppressing all passages of a historical nature.

"No, not that!" protested Chicharra energetically. "Not that; I'll not allow my thoughts to be mutilated."

As they could come to no agreement, somebody promised to draw up a new document, and a much briefer one, on the spot.

Chicharra turned pale. Anything but that. This would mean robbing him of his glory as the father and inspirer of the protestation of unconditional allegiance to the chief executive. Before the by no means smiling prospect of having his manuscript cast aside altogether, Chicharra, now more tractable, agreed to have his thought mutilated.

The manuscript having been despoiled of all its beautiful historical digressions, and reduced to less

than half its original length, was signed by all present.

When it was signed the question arose as to whether this bit of unconditional prose should be sent to the printer's. It should be distributed as a handbill, free. But, who would pay for the printing? Who?

"A waste of money," interposed the waggish, burlesque individual. "Why scatter it broadcast? Our purpose is to reach a single reader: the illustrious chief, the restorer, the great democrat, the hero of duty. . . . That's my opinion. Then let's send him our manuscript. . . ."

They all told him not to be a jackass. And it was decided to take up a collection then and there. The hat of one of the men was handed from person to person. Coins fell scantily into it; with less abundance, in any case, than the laudatory adjectives in Chicharra's document.

When the hat was handed to the famous Aquiles, the famous Aquiles exclaimed:

"It was I who originated the idea of our manifesto; I was the promoter, and, it may be said, the chief of this liberal manifestation; I have only just written this page of our contemporary history which we are about to publish; and finally, I gave the use of my living-room for the present assembly. It is only fair that I should be exempted from contributing anything toward the printing."

And Chicharra, dignified and logical to the end, did not disburse a single *céntimo.*

VII

THE OLD HOME'S FAREWELL

ALL debts must be paid, all terms of respite must come to an end. There arrived at last the moment for the removal of the Agualongas from their old home. Olga had been married the night before. She had suddenly insisted upon the wedding taking place as soon as possible.

Andrés already had the complete furnishings. Olga could now understand Irurtia's insistence.

"I'll put no obstacle in anybody's way," she said, "especially in Rosaura's. Irurtia, becoming angered, might break with her."

"Break what?" asked Rosaura, boldly.

"I understand everything, godmother," replied Olga, shaking her sweet little blonde head with an equivocal gesture.

In short, Olga Emmerich was sacrificing her last weeks as a bachelor maiden all for the sake of the Agualongas.

And indeed the three mothers could not understand Olga's previous delay nor her subsequent eagerness to be married; they imputed these capricious changes to the whims and vagaries of such a queer girl.

The riddle, however, was easy to solve.

The Chilean Minister, accredited at the same time

to Caracas and to Habana, left, several days later, for Cuba, there to present his credentials, and leaving a *chargé d'affaires* in Venezuela. Together with the Minister went Olga's *attaché*, bound for the Pearl of the Antilles. That was all.

There was nothing left for Olga but to marry; and this she did with the utmost haste.

Why wait any longer, to no purpose? Why continue provoking Shylock Irurtia, who, right or wrong, had taken it into his head that when a matter has been agreed upon it must be carried through? It wouldn't do to place any obstacles in the way of the leisurely journey that old, indolent miser was making toward matrimony. Even more: she must take a direct interest in this saponaceous, slippery Irurtia; especially now, when she was on the eve of marriage and when the miser's money, flowing even *céntimo* by *céntimo* into the Agualongas' money-box, might prove so opportunely helpful to Olga and her pauper husband.

Because of her affair with the Chilean, she had, if not forgotten, at least neglected, the miser. And those shrivelled-up, 'fraid-cat, bungling aunts of hers were embroiling themselves in so many minute, futile, complicated scruples, that the millionaire usurer could escape them. But no, you old hairy lizard, you'll not escape as long as Olga draws a breath! Ah, vampire Irurtia, you of the long claws and the gold, Olga will skilfully join you to Rosaura, and bind your existence to that of her godmother! Other hands than yours will hold the cords of your stuffed purse; others than yours will turn the handle of your safe. Do you wish a wife?

Then take her and pay for her. You're not going to be adored for your white hair, your long legs, your donjuanesque excellence, for your rodent's snout, your inquisitorial, hawk-like eyes, your bony face, your ill-groomed beard, your well-chewed nails, your magpie gullet, economical vegetarianism, your sordid stinginess, your crabbed unsociability, your patched clothes and your celluloid collar.

No sooner was their niece's wedding over than the three mothers, with tears still in their eyes, began to put the things together for the removal.

The packing and the transfer of their belongings took several days.

After breakfast Andrés and Olga came to accompany the women and be of whatever assistance they could.

It seemed incredible that there should be so many ancient odds and ends in that structure. Disturbing them, one disturbed the centuries. They came to light from rickety trunks, from strange glass-cases, from chests that lay forgotten in old cob-webbed rooms, which nobody ever visited except Eufemia from time to time, whenever her fondness for antiques and her ennui led her to these dark habitations that smelled of rats and were everywhere embroidered with spider's webs.

As they thus brought out to air and light so many slumbering antiquities, there were renewed in the memory of the three women, and especially in that of Eufemia, recollections of those who in life had been the users and owners of those old objects, which were today but the shadows of things.

What didn't they find? Gowns of a bygone

fashion, tableware with the initials of such and such an ancestor, clocks that marked the hour of a hundred and more years ago; gew-gaws from ever so many years back; bundles of yellow letters; and, in the garrets, damaged furniture, a herdsman's saddle with silver bridle and ornaments, an artist's easel and half-effaced canvases.

Among the pieces of furniture were several of interest: an old bed, for example, and chairs even older.

The bed, or rather the frame of the bed that yet remained, consisted of four salomonic columns about two metres high, adorned with symmetrical protuberances of gold and topped by golden pine-cones. The four posts were connected by cross-pieces of carved wood; each cross-piece displayed, in high relief, eight golden heads of angels or cupids.

Of the chairs but a single pair remained — each with broken legs, loose-jointed, in lamentable and inserviceable condition; yet despite all, majestic amid their ruin. The front legs of each chair represented eagle's talons upon wooden balls; and for a back each had a double-headed eagle with wide-spread wings — an eagle holding in its claws and against its breast, a shield with four quarters: a lion rampant, a tree, some bars, a castle.

Others of the objects were curious: the insignia of the order of Isabel the Catholic, a decoration awarded to one of the royalist Agualongas, defender of Spain in America against the emancipators; a rosary of emeralds, still containing some of the stones; a tortoise-shell snuff-box with openings at each end; a ring woven of a woman's hair, surely.

Near the filigree of a cross that had lost its arms was a nutshell, perhaps the result of unflaggingly patient Chinese labor, containing a laboriously wrought miniature chess board, in ivory, and not far from the nutshell, an oblong case, likewise of ivory, for sewing implements; the thimble and the shears were still there; as to the other pieces, only their empty places were visible.

And portraits, portraits, portraits, in crayon, in oil, in daguerrotype and more modern fashion: men with flowing mustache and energetic countenance; maidens in the bloom of youth; matrons in absurd hoop-skirts or monumental combs; a miniature; the Agualonga with his cross of Isabel of Castile, in oil, and even a recent colored photograph of Olga, which had not satisfied Olga and had therefore been thrown into the heap.

From some of the darkest rooms they extracted vast canvases covered with dust and cobwebs, representing, first, Santa Rosalia, dark, with amorous eyes and ebony tresses; the other, Magdalen, blonde and plump like one of Rubens' Flemish women. Both had belonged to a monastery. When the government of the Republic, in the eighteen-seventies, had closed all religious houses and expelled the monks and the nuns, these paintings had come into the possession of the Agualonga family, having been presented to them by the Carmelites. In the presence of the sacred pictures Eufemia, Alcira and Rosaura recalled that one of the ancestral aunts, Benigna, had belonged to that Order in the Caracas convent.

In the same dark and dank habitation, in a cedar

chest, Andrés Rata came across a rusty sword. Beside the rusty old blade lay a brown velvet case worn away with age. Andrés opened the case and found within two ancient, huge keys, more rusty even than the sword and of even more battered and timeworn aspect. Andrés looked at them for a few moments, and thinking that some monomaniac ancestor had with fanatic care laid away these objects as old as they were useless, fit more for an ironmonger's shop than for preservation, he threw them into the refuse heap.

Then he examined the steel blade: on the hilt, above a date and between two branches of laurel, was engraved a proper name: the name of that Agualonga who, at the age of twenty-four, had won his spurs as captain, at Boyacá, on the 7th of August, 1819, and had been made commandant at Carabobo, the 24th of June, 1821.

Then, surprised that the old rusty keys should have been so carefully preserved together with this weapon, he picked up the case of frayed velvet and calling Olga, asked:

"Can you tell why these antediluvian keys are kept and where they come from?"

"Really, I don't, I can't recall," replied Olga. "They look like keys to a church."

"A church? The keys to hell itself couldn't be larger nor uglier."

They asked Eufemia. And Eufemia knew. Aunt Hipólita had always revered those keys. She had always kept them close beside the sword of Carabobo.

"Those old keys," she said, "are the keys to a city of Alto-Perú: the Spanish generals, vanquished,

gave them over to the conquering generals; and the conquering general, Antonio José de Sucre, Grand Marshal of Ayacucho, presented them to one of his officers, to our ancestor, who distinguished himself among so many heroes, when that city was occupied."

Then she added:

"Nor are these relics the only ones of their kind that are preserved in Venezuela. Venezuela is a veritable museum of such relics. They attest how many marvelous exploits were realized in a certain epoch by the Venezuelans all through America. The municipality of Cumaná possesses the gold, pearl-studded crown that Cochabamba, an ancient and opulent city of the Plata, offered to Sucre, and which Sucre sent to his native Cumaná. The municipality of Caracas preserves in a crystal urn, that famous standard of Pizarro, woven by the hands of a Spanish queen, and hauled down from the legendary Cuzco by a native of Caracas named Simon Bolívar. The keys of Granadine Cartagena, the Carthage of the Indies, may likewise be found in Caracas, in the possession of the last descendants of Mariano Montilla. In Spain, the descendants of general don Pablo Morillo, who conquered Cartagena from the Americans, bear the title Counts of Cartagena. In America the descendents of the Caracas general don Mariano Montilla, who captured Cartagena from the Europeans — and captured it forever — possess only these keys. But they say that it is enough."

That afternoon Olga Emmerich and her husband ate in the home of the Agualongas.

At table the spinsters recalled the discovery — for it might really be called a discovery — of all the old odds and ends that they had already forgotten. The keys of the city of Alto-Perú came up for discussion.

"They are very valuable," said Andrés.

"And I didn't know a thing about them," interjected Olga.

"And to think I threw them into the refuse, without realizing anything," added Rata.

"Yes; they're very valuable," commented Alcira.

Andrés helped to appraise them:

"They are a precious jewel of the Republic."

And after a second, he continued:

"They could be sold to the government."

Eufemia, as if stung by a tarantula, as if shot up by a spring, bounded from her seat, and replying to what she considered little short of a profanation:

"No," she said, "as long as we live we will preserve them, and sell them to nobody. When there is no longer any Agualonga left they will be donated to the Bolivian Museum, free of all charge. They belong to the fatherland, and to the fatherland they should return."

Olga came to her husband's defence.

"Andrés is right. Rather than let them lie in oblivion in some old rickety chest, in danger of being thrown into the refuse heap by the first person that comes along, I'd prefer a hundred times to obtain money for them."

Rosaura interceded.

All the opinions were worthy of consideration. But in the present instance it behooved them all

to do as Eufemia desired. Besides, together with the keys was a document requesting the same course of procedure. Why oppose the wishes of the dead and the living, just for a few *pesetas?*

The following morning a bonfire was made in the corral, and into it were cast many, ever so many, of the ancient, useless odds and ends: all the historic wardrobe, the lame chairs, the rickety tables, the snuff-smelling boxes, the pillows that reeked with mould; all those ancient objects, the nests of cock-roaches, the hammocks of spiders, the hiding places of rats; all those remains of a century or two of change, of wars, of peace, of death, of life. And that bonfire of the past was sad, for there is nothing sadder than life that has already been lived.

Other pieces of furniture and fixtures that might still be used were distributed among beggars and shamefully destitute persons.

The new home had scarcely enough room to contain their indispensable belongings. The place was so tiny!

It almost seemed to Eufemia a symbol of their future existence, which would not be able to contain their existence of yesterday. No traditions, no history. A complete rupture with the past. Those dead ancestors were buried deep. As for their survivors, they must live! It would not be very long before these three comradely lives would, like so many lamps, go out. Their heirs would do as they pleased; they would efface even the memory of the three sisters. To Olga, to Olga's children, there would soon remain not a kindly thought, not a gentle tear — nothing — nothing of that life of

mute heroism, of constant self-sacrifice, of unspoken sadness, which had been lived by the three mothers.

They must depart in the afternoon. They did not wish to await nightfall because of a certain vague superstition. But the sun, fast setting, was drawing near to dusk. It was already six o'clock.

Hurriedly they heaped up whatever effects they had not sent off before because they needed them up to the last moment: a bundle of napkins, towels, the tablecloth; knives, cups, plates, bars of soap, and five or six bird cages. Who was going to give canary seed or banana or avocado to the goldenhammer, the mocking-bird, to the little canaries? They loaded the cook and her half-witted daughter with as much as they could carry. Let them be off as soon as possible.

The three women remained, dressed in black, almost in mourning, with Andrés and Olga to accompany them.

The old manorial dwelling was now a desert.

The five forms moved along like a single body, or stood motionless like a sculptural group, amid those silent cloisters — those spacious, denuded habitations, in that shadowy *patio,* in that corridor of anguish, in that mansion with its dark roofs, with its long rain-gutters like gray arteries, with its ancient protecting eaves, with its weeping willows, with its mute fountain — without a seat on which to sit down, without a picture upon its walls, without a curtain on the windows. Life fled from its walls. The house seemed more powerless, larger, older, sadder than ever.

At last the five grew silent; within each, a silent voice was speaking, and each gave ear to it. An atmosphere of gloom, of respectful veneration, a certain indefinable impression, vague, insistent, dominated them all.

Still silent, and still together, they turned to the garden of the first *patio*.

Eufemia, pale, with sunken eyes, murmured two words almost in Andrés's ear, and Andrés handed her a small object: a penknife.

Then Eufemia stepped forward alone among the plants and cut off stems of nard and of gladiolus. With this bouquet of white and red she walked to a corner of the *patio* where there rose a shrine of stone with a Virgen del Carmen, likewise of stone, in the niche. Before the image, in glasses of oil, burned little butterflies of light. Eufemia deposited the bouquet of snowy flowers and the bunch of red blossoms at the feet of the saint.

The others followed her, gravely and silently, in this last token of homage to the patron saint of the mansion. After she had placed the flowers at the image's feet, Eufemia, without removing her violet eyes from the saint, said:

"Our Lady of Mt. Carmel is an ancient cult of our family. Those who built this house, erected at the same time this altar. This image presided over the birth and youth of us all. On the 26th of March, 1812, at the time of the terrible earthquake that destroyed half of Caracas, this wall fell: only a part of the wall was left unharmed: that section which serves as support to the saint. The Virgin was untouched, rising triumphant above the

ruins. Ever since that time the worship of the saint has grown twice as fervent in our family."

Eufemia's ashen-hued head, her stubby nose, her porcelain pallor, her aristocratic thinness, her purple eyes, imparted majesty to the grief that was written all over her countenance.

Exhausted, meager, wiry, the living soul of the house, Eufemia continued to lead the group about the place. The group turned toward the interior of the dwelling.

The five forms reached a cañon or a corridor off which branched a row of high-walled square rooms; the habitations had already begun to be invaded by the falling shadows. Their steps re-echoed in the darkness.

They crossed two rooms and paused at the third.

"Here," said Eufemia, facing Olga, "here your mother was born. Here Gertrudis was born, and Alcira, Rosaura, and I. Here died our mother. Here died our grandmother. Here died the mother of our grandmother."

Sighs and sobs issued from their throats. And the group of tears traversed other rooms that led to the inner *patio*. In almost every room, they paused to summon memories and family celebrities. The past, here present, was bidding its memory-laden farewell.

Andrés Rata, the intruder, the new-comer, to whom these walls that evoked tears from the women said nothing, nothing at all — that man of mean and grovelling soul, feeling out of place and understanding that he was here superfluous, whispered into Olga's ear:

"Cut this short and let's be off, for heaven's sake. This looks as though it will never come to an end."

Olga made no other reply than a gesture of displeasure that meant: "Shut up, you fool!"

The group returned by another wing of the house. They arrived anew at the front *patio,* where the Virgin, in her stone niche, stood sadly amid her butterflies of light and the flowers at her feet.

A massive granite staircase the steps of which were chipped by use led to the rooms of the first story — really another house within the mansion. During the past few years the Agualongas had rarely ascended these stairs. The floor above had remained a sort of museum and depository of odds and ends; furniture, dress trimmings, knick-knacks, damaged or unused articles — a warehouse of all the antiquities that they had just distributed among the beggars or burned in the pyre of the corral.

Pointing upward with the index finger of her right hand, Eufemia, with her voice of that afternoon — a muffled voice that seemed to issue from an abode of agony, spoke ever so softly:

"More than once aunt Hipólita recounted that in these upper salons the royalist Agualongas gave a ball to General Pablo Morillo and his officers, in May or April of 1815, in celebration of the arrival of the fifteen thousand European soldiers comprising the pacifying army that Morillo had brought; and aunt Hipólita added that in order to efface this recollection the republican Agualongas gave another ball, to Bolívar, in the selfsame salons, on the 2nd of August, 1821.

What a wealth of memories!

The cults of religion, of the family and the fatherland were blended in their love of these massive old walls, so mute to the new-comer, yet so filled for the three spinsters with familiar voices, with ever-fresh recollections, with a hovering past that had not yet disappeared and which might well have been called present.

Night continued to advance.

Eufemia ceased speaking and the group stood silent in the corridor, ready to leave, not far from the door of the outer vestibule.

It was the definitive moment of farewell.

None of the women dared to be the first to take a step forward toward the exit; none dared to break the silence. Their handkerchiefs rose to their eyes.

In the midst of the invading darkness, which had now become almost complete, Rosaura covered her face with both hands and her tears fell in silence. A recollection had suddenly come to her mind; that of the last time she had, in that same corridor, close by that same door, facing the perfumed *patio,* pressed the hand of the man who loved her — the man whom she loved but whom she had refused because of Olga. And now an ordinary fellow was taking Olga away; now, when Rosaura no longer was in the bloom of her youth, when her spirit flagged, when she needed affection, support, warmth, a home. And now a grotesque old caricature, an odious usurer, insulted her misfortune with his ridiculous pretensions! And she must endure his chatter, his company, lest Chicharra call her egoist and Olga upbraid her as a bad mother, incapable of the slightest

sacrifice! She was disgusted with life. She wished to die!

All at once Rosaura became aware that someone was tenderly embracing her, and that someone's sigh was being stifled against her shoulder.

It was Alcira, whose own intimate thoughts were tugging at her heart and moistening her eyes, impelling her gently toward sisterly arms.

Night had fallen completely.

And here were the superstitious women, fearing the gloom, the sinister darkness, in the last farewell to their ancestral home! . . .

When, at last, having reached the street, they turned the four-pound key in the solemn cedar portal with its bronze plates and ornaments, in those three hearts, ill with homesickness and victimized by fate, the key was also turned upon all smiling hope, all future illusions.

They were already placing their feet upon the step of a coach that was to lead them to their new dwelling, when some half shut door, swung by the wind, closed with a sudden, noisy bang.

That bang of the door was the farewell of the ancestral home.

PART THREE

I

BIRDS OF A FEATHER

WHEN she recognized Chicharra's voice, Olga advanced to meet the general in more or less feigned surprise.

"Your excellency in my home! How glad I am to see you, my dear general!"

Chicharra smiled, extending both his hands toward her.

"Yes, dear niece. I said to myself, 'If the mountain doesn't come to me, I'll go to the mountain.' "

"But the mountain was thinking of coming to you, uncle! It's a case of telepathy. We have so many things to talk over."

"We always have things to talk over. Fortunately we understand each other well."

Olga, who so well knew this vain, grotesque creature, assured him that they understood each other because he, who was a truly great man, was always able to descend to the level of others and fit himself to their smaller stature, without crushing anybody with his indisputable superiority.

"A great man, my dear niece! And as short as I am!"

"What about Caesar! And Bolívar! And Napoleon!"

"Hush, child, hush," replied the hero, dizzied by the incense.

And turning his eyes roguishly in the direction of Olga's abdomen, where maternity did not yet delineate its noble curve, he asked her jestingly:

"Married four months and nothing doing yet?"

"Nothing, uncle! A three-cornered honeymoon! How horrible! Even when the third party remains in his place."

The hero opportunely began to philosophize.

Olga in good humor, as usual. But, why not? She was young. What a treasure is youth! "Youth, divine treasure!"[17] It is never appreciated until it has flown. It is like sight, another treasure whose true value is known only by the blind. He had suffered a great disillusionment — a very great one. His experience in life was vast indeed. In his mouth he felt a foretaste of bitterness.

"These white hairs," he added, touching his gray strands, "enclose more wisdom than a library. Accumulated experience, my girl; that is all of learning."

Chicharra expanded in pertinent considerations of the most platitudinous philosophy.

A young man, however gifted and studious he might be, would always be ignorant of half the things that Chicharra knew by heart simply from having lived. He had wasted none of his time learning nonsense; he had not gone blind burning the midnight oil; his books were daily experience, observation, nature, man. His knowledge of the human

[17] A quotation of the first line of Rubén Darío's famous poem beginning "Juventud, divino tesoro."

heart and his store of social experience were profound.

"And all this to what avail, my dear niece?" he asked in a melancholy accent. "What's the use? More than four months ago I headed a liberal movement, and what's the result? Answer me, I say. What has come of it?"

"You must have got something out of it, Uncle," said Olga, ambiguously and courteously.

"Nothing; not a *céntimo*. . . . If the conservatives say the contrary, it's an atrocious bit of slander. It's more than six months — six months! — since the government forsook me. They treat me as if I were pest-stricken. Even the very liberals of the ministry slam the door in my nose."

Olga smiled to herself at the thought of a door slamming against uncle Aquiles' carbuncle-like nasal appendage.

Chicharra noticed the impertinent smile and he resumed his account, somewhat provoked:

"That slamming the door in my nose is merely a rhetorical figure, you'll understand."

Olga, desiring to scatter the cloud that her sudden hilarity had produced, protested:

"For the Lord's sake, Uncle, I should say it was. You don't have to tell me that. I ought to know who Aquiles Chicharra is! At the slightest display you'd eat the ministry alive, with the President as dessert."

This sally had its effect.

Chicharra's spirit brightened and recovered its diaphanous serenity. Even the carbuncle of his nose, becoming congested with pleasure, began to

glow. He certainly would eat the offenders alive! Olga knew him better than anybody else. He was no hector nor braggart, but he certainly would eat them alive! Yes, indeed; he was capable of anything — anything at all — when his honor was assailed. That would be the last straw! Since he did not possess, like others, a swollen fortune acquired in politics, but rather a modest pittance that just enabled him to get along, his sole treasure consisted in his good name. That good name, which he would hand down to his offspring, he would hold intact at all costs.

Olga listened resignedly. Chicharra himself, understanding that he had been harping too long upon himself, and desirous of flattering Olga, so that Olga would grant him what he had come to ask, said to her:

"And you, niece? Confide in me."

"Heavens, Uncle. A married woman to betray her confidences! Don't you think that a woman's intimate thoughts belong to her husband, too? And that she can't speak of them without betraying her husband?"

"Very well; if they belong to both, half of them are yours. And I imagine you may do as you please with your half. Let's see, then. Speak."

"No, I can't share it with you, Uncle. The treasure is kept undivided; intact, as you say of your honor."

"Humbug, my little girl! Humbug! You simply distrust me!"

Distrust him! Very well then, she would tell him, for Chicharra was an exception as far as she

was concerned. He had made the match; he had introduced her to Andrés; he had induced the Agualongas to accept Rata, or had at least contributed to that result. In a word: Chicharra had married her off. Whether she was happy or not, she owed it all to him and to nobody else.

When had Chicharra ever evaded responsibility? Wherefore, in the consciousness of that responsibility which the blonde and graceful creature had so prettily imputed to him, the imponderable Aquiles, the hero without peer, the favorite of fame and ridicule, exclaimed:

"But you are surely happy. That can be seen from your face; it sounds from your very conversation. Andrés is a young Liberal of high merit . . . and great future. He's on the right road."

"He's as good as an angel to me. He tries to anticipate my every thought, though at times he doesn't succeed. He'd throw himself into the flames for me. But frankly, Uncle, it's hard to get used to living with a man that you never lived with. It means a disruption of one's most deeply rooted habits; a sacrifice of one's most personal whims — mere nonsense, of course, but yet so important."

"But there are compensations."

"There are compensations, to be sure. But just as surely, the bruskness of the change surprises one. Above all in my case, Uncle. Remember that it's a matter of persons so diverse in origin, habits, relations, ideas. Although the same thing must happen to all newly-weds. Don't you think so, Uncle?"

"That may well be, my girl: I have never been a recently married young lady."

The hero laughed vociferously at his own joke. And in the midst of his guffaws, he said to himself: "That's a mighty fine one; I must repeat it when the chance offers, before a more public audience."

"In a word," resumed the general. "Does matrimony please you or not?"

"The good part I like. I should say so. The bad, no."

"And what do you call the bad?"

Olga found it hard to explain. Perhaps what she judged bad in matrimony was bad only in her case — in her, in Andrés, or in both. Who knows! Life is one surprise after another. The most important things, which bulk large in other folks' lives, she saw through eyes that were nearly blind; but certain insignificant things she frankly could not tolerate; they wracked her nerves, they embittered her, they caused her suffering. For example, no sooner does Andrés come home than he puts on a pair of threadbare slippers and urges her to go about the house in the same free manner, without any corset.

"But these are trifles unworthy of mention. A little maneuvering and coaxing on your part and . . ."

"Trifles! But it's just such trifles that distinguish persons in society. We've been married already four months and all my coaxing and maneuvering have been of no avail in curing him of this and other enormous trifles. I'm fond of Andrés — of course; but, I freely grant, I give him permission, yes, permission, to do as he pleases, and then I'm the one to suffer tortures."

"Why, my dear niece, this isn't drowning one's

self in a vase of water, but rather in a half vase, or a drop, like a miserable insect."

"And you call it a drop of water to have been compelled to give up the greater number of my social relations, in order to spare Andrés, just because he hasn't the same friends?"

"Then — divorce?"

"Who's talking of divorce? Nonsense! I don't complain. I mention this so that you may do what you can for me; but at bottom I'm very happy with my husband. The proof is that I knowingly renounced everything, all for his sake."

The truth was that she had not withdrawn from society; it was society that had withdrawn from her.

That gradual withdrawal had mortified her vanity. She felt the aversion, and try as she might like the worldly-wise creature she was, to conceal the hurt, she was now voicing the pangs of the wound.

Chicharra had heard his daughter Tula remark more than a hundred times that ever since Olga's marriage, everybody had begun to shun her. And now Olga herself was confessing it. And Chicharra, instead of pretending not to understand and shifting the course of the conversation, exclaimed:

"And why do they repudiate Andrés! It's their imbecilic conservative and ultramontane prejudices!"

"And the Liberals are the same, Uncle."

"I don't believe it."

"Then believe it now. These aren't party follies or hatreds; they are class prejudices. The social groups, especially those that consider themselves

superior, defend themselves passionately against intruders from without."

"That's bad."

"It's good, say I. They owe their existence to that *esprit de corps.*"

She paused for the interval of a sigh, and added:

"Among these persons even the highest virtues of outsiders meet with no ready welcome; on the other hand, they shut their eyes tight to the faults of their own set."

Olga began to cite instances; and she poured out all her venom in the names.

Doña X., who has four children from as many different fathers. The Z girls, who have "at homes" for men only. Don So-and-so, a drunken sot. Don Such-and-such, who had occupied but three public offices because he had only three daughters. There were the children of doña Perenceja, a woman whom they called doña Pereza (i.e., idleness), because idleness is the mother of all vices. Francisco Linares Alcántara — Alcantarita, that overripe hermaphrodite and lardaceous poltroon, who had the soul, the shape, the whims and vices of a woman.

Olga might have added her own example.

She had been accepted, with a smile on their lips, despite those moles of hers which were so many in number that they almost darkened her complexion. On the day she married Andrés Rata all doors were closed to her.

Chicharra applauded Olga's inexhaustible, mordant, caustic speech.

"You're a thermocautery, niece. You are terrible."

And translating a cowardly thought that occurred to him, he said:

"I shouldn't care to fall into your claws."

"You! My uncle, my friend, my ally? I don't show my nails to you. That would be rank ingratitude. I admire and respect all that is worthy of respect and admiration. As for the rest, *chust*."

And her lips imitated scornful expectoration.

After a moment, she added:

"One needs money, money, money."

And she returned to the point:

"You must have money to be independent, to travel, to get out of this horrible rat-hole of Caracas, to be happy."

Chicharra nodded assent, while Olga continued to speak:

"And by the way, Uncle," continued Olga, by force of the association of ideas. "By the way: this Irurtia affair isn't going well at all."

"What do you mean, not going well?"

"Those crazy aunts of mine are letting the opportunity slip by. They haven't even been clever enough to hold on to him. While I was there don Camilo got into the habit of visiting my godmother daily, or almost as often; he was already on the point of coming out with his song, and perhaps proposing to her. Well, now he hardly ever pays them a visit. They've let him not only get cold, but absolutely congeal. The old Shylock's enthusiasm has already passed."

"Passed? At his age? Until when could he postpone it?"

"If it hasn't passed, it will. I know the wily old

fellow. But I can't lead the procession now. I can't live here and in my aunts' home at the same time."

"Those women — the poor souls — are very good indeed," assured Chicharra, "but they are certainly silly geese."

And recalling that opportunity is depicted bald, he tried to seize the chance that had presented itself to him, promising his aid to Olga in this Irurtia affair, in exchange for what he asked of her — what he had come to solicit from his niece.

"Very well, my dear niece," he began. "I promise to help us catch the old fox. He won't escape us two."

Olga approved the idea.

Escape them! Not if he were a hundred times as foxy!

Chicharra added:

"We'll concoct a plan with due deliberation, without any haste. I hate sudden, improvised affairs, lacking all foundation and solidity. You just complete whatever occurs to you; I, my girl, am at your service without any sort of condition."

Olga smiled. How solemn this almost political language was! This offer of Chicharra's services, "without any sort of condition," moved her to laughter. She told him so, and his vanity was piqued.

"And you, niece? Weren't you talking more solemnly than a college graduate, a few moments ago, when with a veritable sociologist's expression you ventured your opinions upon social groups and their narrow exclusivism? Let us not investigate

details too closely. That is unworthy of us. And long live our alliance!"

"Viva!" exclaimed Olga, clapping her hands.

"'A very noble and very loyal' alliance, like the city of Coro in the Spanish days. I ask of you and you give me — I give you if you ask me."

"That depends, Uncle. I, a woman; you, an incorrigible gallant; you are liable to ask me certain things that I may grant only to my husband."

She had spoken in jest, and it was as a jest that Chicharra took her words, although he was at bottom happy that the girl should believe him, "perhaps in good faith," a persistent wooer. And quick as a lightning flash, he thought: "If she only knew the truth; that I am not really such." The eager intent was never lacking, however. Good heavens, whenever he gazed at a short skirt, whenever he encountered the little girls of thirteen or fourteen coming out of school and displaying their little provoking calves! Before the stockings and skirts of a full-grown or almost adult maiden, he felt himself a faun. He was capable of pouncing upon her, as on that distant afternoon with Olga, when he grew hot with lust as he showed the child scabrous photographs, while her velvety, pink skin and the blonde little hairs of her neck engulfed his senses and aroused the satyr in him, which was then ever on the alert.

This sudden recollection almost caused Chicharra to blush, for he feared lest his niece make out his indecent thought.

"For some time," he said, "I have been concerned only with public affairs."

Maliciously she harped upon her ideas of gallantry.

"Public affairs! A strumpet is a public affair. Don't slander yourself, Uncle."

"My dear girl, please! I'm speaking of politics. Politics absorbs me."

And in order to forestall any other nonsense on Olga's part, he added, hurriedly:

"And it was concerning politics that I came to speak to you."

"I'm all ears."

"Listen, then."

"I'm listening."

He complained that Olga wouldn't be serious even for a minute at a time. And yet, what he was about to mention was by no means a laughing matter.

As she now seemed disposed to listen to him with interest, since evidently Chicharra was not up to any of his faunish tricks, he began to explain his plans. What a project!

For more than six months the government had appeared hostile to him. More than four months previous he had headed a great Liberal manifestation, without the slightest result. Then, at the time of the banquet given in honor of the chief executive, he had originated and made public an extensive manifestation, "a pithy document," to the President of the Republic.

The chief executive was unmoved.

Even private letters, ardent and enthusiastic in the extreme, were left unanswered. Seeing how unavailing his public and private efforts were, and how bootless were the offices of the ministers, whom the

President was pleased to ignore, he directed himself to the wife of the attorney, that she might obtain him some modest little post.

"A little post?" asked Olga, amazed at the general's modesty.

"A post that shall accord with my political importance and my long list of services to the Liberals. You know that I have been everything in Venezuela, except Archbishop and President."

"Very well. And the attorney's wife?"

"She wasn't able to get anything for me, either. Like her husband, she finally stopped answering my letters. As for visiting her, a useless task. My perseverance lagged: I never saw her. As you may gather from my remarks, these persons seem determined to force me into the camp of the opposition. I dislike extreme measures; but if they compel me, it will be terrible."

"And is that your plan, uncle? Is that what you are counting on my aid for?"

Chicharra soothed her.

No; it wasn't that. Before taking such a step he would like to try a master stroke. He knew politics fairly well, and had not yet lost his courage. Olga surely must know how fond the President was of dancing. He was a veritable ballet-dancer!

And energetically, he added:

"That scoundrel plays politics with his feet."

"Yes, he's wild for dancing."

"Well, then, I'll give a ball in his honor."

Olga applauded; and, her curiosity aroused, she was eager to learn what rôle Chicharra had assigned to her in all this scheming.

"What rôle?" replied Chicharra. "A very important one: the leading one, in fact. You'll see."

"Very well. Let's see."

Then he explained.

The president, in addition to being crazy about dancing and a veritable faun, loved women even more than the dance. He was a lewd, bestial, despicable fellow; but he must be taken as he was. They could not transform that lascivious ape, whirled from the forests by the revolutionary hurricane, into a perfect gentleman overnight. Ah, those revolutions, those revolutions! How he hated them!

The hero was about to launch forth into an extemporaneous disquisition; but Olga brought him back to the point.

"And your plan? And my rôle?"

In short, he would give a ball to that cave man, but that was not the important point. The troglodyte was given so many balls! The novelty consisted in a certain quadrille; or, more exactly, in a quadrille figure that he, Chicharra, had invented.

In the aforesaid figure, at a given moment, the gentlemen separate from the ladies. That is, all withdraw except one gentleman. Around this sole remaining gentleman the women close in a circle, thus weaving a garland of beauties. The circle keeps getting narrower and narrower. The women thus, with their bodies, stifle the lucky man in the center. The latter's partner, pressed on by the avalanche of women, remains for a moment before her gallant, tightly squeezed to him, body to body, so that not a hair can pass between them. Then the figure opens up, ever so slowly . . .

Chicharra was of the opinion that this would be a master stroke.

The satyr of the mountains, the overwhelmed President — the center of the choreographic figure, naturally — would turn half crazy amidst so many feminine forms, breathing aphrodisiac perfumes, garlanded with tender arms, surrounded by nude shoulders, feeling and beholding bosoms and backs that would press softly against him; before him, most important of all, he would feel the intimate contact of a youthful, beautiful, dazzling, maddening maiden.

"It's a great stroke, niece," assured the famous and inestimable Chicharra, rubbing his palms. "It's a master stroke! Maybe I don't know a thing or two about politics! Maybe I don't know men! Either that monkey from the mountains loses his head, or my name isn't Aquiles Chicharra."

To get down to brass tacks — would Olga be willing to play the rôle of the President's partner in that quadrille?

She raised objections. "Caracas would gossip. And suppose Andrés should not consent?"

"Andrés will be tickled to death," exclaimed Chicharra confidently. "Delighted. I know him better than you do."

And he went on:

"As compensation, I offer to bring about Irurtia's marriage to Rosaura; and, if you wish it, I'll get a consulate for Andrés. In that way, you can spend two or three years in Europe; and in the meantime, let Caracas gossip all it pleases."

Olga hesitated.

The hero ended by assuring her:

"In Europe the world is yours: that is your proper field of activity."

Olga was still hesitant. Chicharra was unable to obtain a little post for himself, and here he was, promising consulates! Then she thought: "Perhaps it would be worth while for me to manipulate the President and let him know who I am." The friendship of the President might compensate for the recently lost friendship of Caracas. Life was so complicated!

Chicharra, seeing that she was vacillating, tried to bring her to a decision, placing her between the sword and the wall:

"What is your answer? Yes or no? Remember that opportunity is depicted bald. Our very destiny rests upon this affair. What do you say?"

Olga raised her bust; she raised her pretty, blonde head, as if in defiance of all celestial and terrestrial powers, and replied:

"I accept."

II

A HOUSE THAT TORTURES EUFEMIA AND PROVES ROSAURA'S SALVATION

THE Agualongas had no cause for complaint against Irurtia. They had heard so many evil things spoken of the money-lender, and their heads had been filled with so many tales concerning the miser, that Eufemia, Alcira and Rosaura, despite their invariable tendency to believe in one's good intentions, in one's kind heart, and in everybody's honesty — projecting their own characters into those of the persons with whom they dealt — despite that candid optimism which had cost all three so dearly, could not liberate themselves from a feeling of apprehension and mistrust regarding Irurtia. Up to the very last moment they had feared some Shylockian trick, afraid lest Shylock should not fulfil his agreement and give them a house and money in exchange for their hereditary home.

Particularly fearful were Alcira and Eufemia, to whom Olga had always spoken of Irurtia in a manner quite distinct from that in which she mentioned him to Rosaura. To the first two sisters she represented him as a bandit, a swindler, more slippery than an eel. But fortunately he was in love. The fate of them all depended upon Rosaura. Without Rosaura's collaboration, without her kind

reception of Irurtia's attentions, Irurtia would escape them, leaving them not a *céntimo*. In that case, the argument had run, Olga could not get married. What a misfortune! The two sisters must see to it that Rosaura tolerated the wealthy scamp.

Her godmother she humbugged in another way, and with different arguments. Irurtia was, at bottom, the finest of fellows. He had his faults, naturally, like all the rest of us. She should tolerate him a bit, provisionally, so that he should open his coffer of gold. Afterwards, they would see. For the present, let Rosaura make a little sacrifice for Olga's sake. Her god-daughter's future depended upon it. Rosaura held Olga's happiness in her hands. But let her do as she thought best. Olga demanded nothing.

The rogue knew her three mothers. She knew them very well, indeed.

So that, because of Olga's arguments, Alcira and Eufemia shut their eyes to the fairly serious pretensions of Irurtia, if, in fact, they did not encourage him with the utmost tact. But they had faith in Rosaura. Somehow or other, in some magic manner, Rosaura would exorcise the danger. Wherefore they always called her selfish when in her sullen moments she refused to receive the old man.

Working in such a way, Eufemia and Alcira, inveigled by Olga, were unwittingly made into fellow-conspirators of their niece. Yet not for a moment did either of the sisters believe in Olga's distorted project nor in the genuine possibility of Rosaura's marriage to Irurtia.

Alcira and Eufemia believed implicitly that it was

due to Rosaura that don Camilo had not withdrawn from the negotiations.

"It's all your work, Rosaura," the sisters assured her.

"God knows what it costs me," replied the other.

Only for Olga's sake could she have made the sacrifice of enduring don Camilo for afternoon upon afternoon, week after week.

Irurtia, indeed, had lived up to his word.

He had given over to them as good as new, or almost as good, the house they had agreed upon; and he had given into their hands, in cash, the sum previously fixed upon, with which they married Olga, "as befitted a princess," provided themselves with clothes and, finally, paid the expenses of the removal. Whatever was left they delivered almost intact to their niece, against any unforeseen necessity. The Agualongas could foresee no events in their own case that might be exorcised with money, for they had saved no money. What could three spinsters like them need! The little pension that they received as nieces of the illustrious patriot was enough to supply their requirements.

Although dissatisfied with destiny, which had compelled them to depart from their patrimonial home, the Agualongas felt grateful to Irurtia, or something akin to gratitude. Thanks to him they had been able to marry off Olga.

"Thanks to me," Rosaura would at times amend, having become filled with the importance of her rôle in that affair.

"Thanks first of all to you. But if don Camilo had cared to play us some trick . . ."

This they often repeated:

"If don Camilo had cared to play us some trick!"

"Then farewell to the wedding," Andrés would conclude, with a pedantic phrase.

It was this chimerical trick that Irurtia had not played them, for which they were grateful to him.

And they even thought:

"Perhaps he hasn't even made, on the exchange, as much as we imagine."

The miser of an Irurtia had reaped his little harvest — that was certain. According to his maxims and his practises, business was business. It was like a duel: the blades cross, the opponents fence: the art consists in wounding your adversary and yourself escaping without a scratch.

This time, Irurtia's opponent had been the woman he loved. But his affection for Rosaura — his very sincere affection — was not enough to lead him into committing a folly. Sentiment has nothing to do with the pocketbook. Love is one thing and money is another. They mustn't be confounded.

Irurtia proposed that the Agualongas should occupy a pretty little house, comfortable and relatively spacious. He would thus kill two birds with one stone. In addition to doing these pious women a genuine favor, he would disburse the smallest possible sum in compensation; the better the house he offered them, the less money he would have to give with it.

This idea had already occurred to him out of antipathy to Olga, when the negotiations began; then, as his feeling of repulsion for the niece com-

menced to disappear, on account of the latter's flattering wiles, Irurtia grew firmer in his first resolution, not now through antipathy for the Emmerich girl, but through his esteem for the Agualongas.

For this reason he insisted that they should choose that pretty little cottage in the parish of Santa Teresa, which he had not suggested to them until quite late, when he saw that he would be unable to entrap them into one of the rat-holes that he had previously proposed. The latter had all been rejected, for one reason or another.

And if out of a sense of duty he had the house made over to look new, or almost new, it was out of sympathy for the women that he was pleased to behold it resplendent, despite the cheap paint he had used in restoring it, the used tiles with which he had roofed it, the second-hand sewer-covers that had been purchased from a dealer in cast-off wares and used as coverings for mains and drains.

His liberality did not go a jot beyond the limit, though he asserted the contrary.

Had he not even gone so far as to swear to Rosaura more than once that he had spent in those repairs far more than he would have done if he were dealing with other persons? Once he even affirmed that he had committed such extravagant deeds just to please her. As Rosaura was vexed by this remark, Irurtia in the future limited himself to displaying his disinterestedness and the beauty of the home in laudatory phrases:

"It's as neat as a silver dish," he would say at times.

And at others:

"You'll be as comfortable there as cream on milk."

Irurtia proved to be a false prophet.

Cast out of their nest, the Agualongas could not accustom themselves to their new dwelling.

Eufemia, in particular, always sickly and with monastic habits, never going out except to church on Sundays, or to visit some old relative, or to see Olga some morning or other, complained bitterly.

"I'm stifling between these four walls. It seems that I live in a prison."

Rosaura and Alcira, both because they were of a more resigned temperament, and because they were younger and suffered from no physical ailments, found it less difficult to habituate themselves to their new surroundings, though not a day passed in which the three women did not miss their old family mansion. Eufemia, while the three spinsters fed upon memories, would shed tears of longing and grief.

With the intention of dispelling the gloom that had cast its spell over their eldest sister, and at the same time of brightening somewhat their existence, Alcira and Rosaura, on the day following their removal, commenced as far as possible to transform that "tiny, ugly" house, as Alcira called it.

The rooms, which they found papered in the worst taste, with absurd decorations and chocolate tints, were papered over again in simple, cheerful colors.

With no other assistance than that which the simple-minded cook's daughter could lend them, they realized this work all by themselves. Nobody lent a hand, not even Eufemia, who appeared determined not so much to live, as to await death.

Afternoons, at first, Olga would come to keep them company; but Olga would under no circumstances smear her hands with paste, nor would she climb the stairs for fear of a dizzy spell, nor would she hammer in a tack for fear of striking her fingers with the hammer. The two sisters, who had no right to fear a blow, or a dizzy spell, or the odor from the paste, went through the house from the portraits of the salon to the mirror in the bath-room.

And with no other collaborator than the half-witted domestic, both women beautified the house, lovingly imparting ornamental touches.

And in order to beguile Eufemia's life into less bitterness, the generous souls, in the first place, tried to surround her with recollection of the former household.

Thus, one of the rooms, despite its restricted area, was arranged just as Eufemia had kept it for almost half a century in the old home: there was the bed in which had died the mother of the Agualongas, and it was made exactly as it had been in the days of the departed; there was the pocket-watch that their father had used when alive, seemingly waiting for its owner to come and place it in his waistcoat; there was the armchair of Cordovan leather, which had belonged to aunt Hipólita, and in which, helplessly seated in her final days, she had so often descanted upon the early days of the nation. Various souvenirs, of the most diverse character, held alive the memory of some of the family's departed: the father's musket was the weapon with which their brother had accidentally shot himself on a hunting expedition; the coffer upon the console table contained the grand-

mother's jewelry; that ivory crucifix was an heirloom from their grandmother's mother; this rosary had belonged to a religious of the Holy Land, and the Carmelite aunt had presented it to Eufemia.

In four or five months the little house seemed an altogether different place.

In the horrible, barren *patio* they had ditches dug; the ditches, by the work and grace of the humus, the seeds and care, were transformed into rose-bushes of purple, gold and snow-white; into clumps of white Malabar jessamine, into sweet-smelling purple heliotropes, thirsty for the sun. At the rear they placed a vine of heartsease, transplanted from their former home, and in the shade of this vine, seated in the dining-room, they would pass the hot hours of the day sewing. The windows that faced the little *patio* were soon festooned with bluebells. In green jars they planted jessamine, which flourished in compact, fragrant little buds, blood-colored geraniums, ruby begonias, hortensias of very delicate blue, and daisies of silver and gold. On the edge of each pot a green wreath, a wreath of tea-leaves surrounded these gold and silver daisies, the celestial hortensias, the rosy begonias, the crimson geraniums and the Arabian jessamine buds.

Eufemia, with a little indulgence, might have beheld in this new dwelling, if not the counterpart, at least a fair imitation of the ancient manorial home, and might have determined to live without that shadow of sadness which the change had cast over her soul and across her features.

But it was all in vain; she could not habituate herself to the place.

Almost daily, in her obstinate, annoying manner, she would sing the same song:

"I'm stifling between these four walls. It seems I'm in a prison."

As Irurtia continued to visit them persistently after the removal, Rosaura bethought herself of some schemes to get rid of the intrusive fellow. She proposed to her sisters a rupture with the old miser, and argued well in its favor: since the exchange of properties was already effected, nobody could now suppose that failure to display patience with the advances of the broker could lead to the frustration of their plans. The Lord knew that she had tolerated Irurtia only for Olga's sake, for the happiness of her niece and out of deference to her sisters. That Chicharra had called her egotist and a wicked person hurt her very much. How many times had she asked herself: "Can Chicharra, Olga, Eufemia and Alcira be right, after all?"

Life was a sort of Purgatory. She believed that implicitly. "Life is Purgatory." She must endure Irurtia, and she suffered him. Now things had changed. They no longer needed the bloodsucker for anything. She could now kick him out into the street.

Her two sisters were seized with genuine scruples.

"No, Rosaura," they told her. "Such an opinion is hardly noble, nor even correct. When we needed that man we received him most kindly, and now that he can no longer be of any use to us, we kick him out! No. That's not just."

Rosaura deplored such reasoning.

"Not just! Then what you call just and proper is

for me to sacrifice myself to an old, odious stranger, to that hairy old lizard, as Olga used to call him. That Caracas should be gossiping about me doesn't matter! That I should be disgusted doesn't matter! That I should be nauseated by the repulsive animal doesn't matter! I must be noble. Very well, then; I can't understand the sort of nobility you preach. It's true that this sermon in Irurtia's favor costs you very little; yet you hardly know him, while you take sides against me, your own sister. The victim, and the only victim, is I."

"But you're not sacrificing yourself," they argued. "You never receive him alone. We all receive him, and we all suffer equally, and with resignation, if we must suffer. You know very well that the notion of your receiving him alone was not ours, but one of Olga's whims. We agreed to it through fear that Irurtia might clear out, leaving us high and dry and unable to marry off our poor little niece."

The difficulty was overcome.

In the future Irurtia would be received by the three sisters, together.

Olga's absence permitted such an expedient. Liberated from the surveillance, the comments, the wiles and the constant pressure of their niece, the women acted as they saw fit, and believed that they had reached a properly-balanced compromise between the ordinary civility due to Irurtia and a regard for their sister's feelings.

In the meantime they missed Olga; Rosaura, particularly. The cramped quarters continued to torture the three, especially Eufemia.

They were not happy.

III

THE VICTORIOUS GOLD-PIECE

DON CAMILO evidently took little pleasure in the strategy of the Agualonga sisters. He had already become so accustomed to his evening chats with Rosaura! He could not forego his daily visit. And to be received by the three together signified a retrogression in those sweet relations between him and Rosaura.

Alone with a woman a man may speak nonsense; more, the conversation is almost wholly confined to mere trifles. But just these trifles acquire worth because of their intimate character, through the very inflections of the voice, which say more than the voice itself; because being alone transforms you, apparently, at least, and the tête-à-tête, though it turn upon the heat or the rain, assumes a confidential aspect.

Passion exercised a despotic rule in that virgin heart. That senile affection absorbed all the sentimental sap of a life which had known no youth, of a youth that had known no love. He was a man of strong passions, and love now dawned in his heart all the more violent because of its tardiness; all his affection for woman that had been kept in store, all this unknown stock of tenderness, all this dry powder, exploded upon being brought close to a beautiful match: two feminine eyes.

Irurtia was urged on by a confused presentiment — a presentiment rather than a conviction — that love would soon be useless to him. Decadence of powers beats its wings when old age comes along the road.

It is true that in Irurtia the passion for gold dominated every other passion; and when such a passion rules over a being with such power, the other passions disappear, for the first nourishes itself upon the substance of all the rest, which wither and die. But it is none the less true that in Irurtia's oncoming days of revived passion, love had appeared, which signifies that there had existed, in a latent, dormant stage, those carnal appetites which are, at times, fundamentally nothing but unrequited sensitive or voluptuous necessities, and at others, paternal desires, affective needs that demand satisfaction.

Nature has made these desires almost always imperious, but even when they are vague, they are inflexible; it is as if the fate of the species depended upon these desires that every man feels in his innermost being.

In Irurtia's heart a battle was about to be waged between gold and woman. Which would triumph?

The continuous reception by the three together meant, in Irurtia's eyes, a decisive moment in his sentimental existence, and his one thought was to steer clear of the danger. He changed his hours. For two or three days he did not come at all. Whatever wiles he employed in this matter were utterly fruitless. The women, when it came to this game, bested him every time.

The first afternoon he imagined — for everybody is at bottom vain, even Irurtia — that the three had received him together out of courtesy; their removal to a country-house which had formerly been the property of don Camilo, its aptitude for their needs, their complete satisfaction with the place, the fact that they were just settling down in it, and who knows what else — must have something to do, according to the broker's reasoning, with his being received by the three together.

Then it occurred to him that the smallness of the house had something to do with it, and continuing to believe that the house was to blame, he thought: "I should have given them a larger house; it would have meant less money out of my pocket and now I should be enjoying more privacy in my visits."

Whereupon he exculpated himself with the following argument: "The hare goes to the best huntsman."

Little by little it penetrated the broker's mind that the smallness of the house had nothing to do with the sisters' resolution to receive him together. For it *was* a resolution: now he could see it clearly.

And why should the Agualongas have determined to act as they were acting? Irurtia could find no explanation. He had always been faultlessly correct in his attitude toward Rosaura; and on her side, she had not countenanced the slightest departure from rigid convention. She was so fierce in her gentleness! Could Olga's wicked hand be secretly concerned in this? He dismissed the thought as absurd. Who had been as sweet of tongue in the old Agualonga's home? Olga had looked most favor-

ably upon his relations with Rosaura, if, indeed, she had not fostered them altogether.

Well, then? . . .

By dint of all this debating, moving from induction to induction, Irurtia concluded or deduced the following: they were purposely provoking him, so as to force him to speak of marriage, since during the time of his intimate conversations with Rosaura he had never done so.

"It's my money they're after," he thought. "Very well. They won't get it." They looked like three flies, yet they were really three leeches. So they were after his money, were they? They had knocked at the wrong door. Irurtia's money, gathered with such hard effort, during so many years of privations, wasn't going to belong to the first comer. As long as Irurtia drew breath, he'd know how to defend it.

A confused idea of fraud and ruin agitates don Camilo's mind. The contemplation of such a horror sends an icy shiver up his spine and makes his hair stand on end. "I prefer death," he repeats to himself. "Sooner death a hundred times, than lose my fortune."

On a certain night, just as he was about to retire, these thoughts struck him with particular force. Terrified, he resolved to break with the Agualongas and never visit them again. Only those accursed burglars of some years previous had caused him a feeling of terror at all comparable to what he now felt at thought of the Agualongas. What a narrow escape!

For a week he did not give even a thought to the

worthless trio, except to consider them with that retrospective horror of the person who has miraculously escaped alive from some train collision.

Rosaura's image fluttered about his mind. He would shut his eyes — as if with his eyes closed he could not see her — in a heroic effort to banish her from his spirit. The pretending adventuress! The deceiver!

In Irurtia's mind the three sisters were blended in the same sentiment of horror and repulsion.

As time went on and he continued to go over the matter in his mind, he gradually began to apportion responsibility. Which of the three deserved the most scorn and inspired the deepest hatred? Once again there appeared before Irurtia's mental vision the image of Rosaura, heightened by mistrust and fear. Before those timid, bovine eyes — before that glance of melancholy tenderness, that charm which rose from her full lips, that dull-lustered, amber skin, that oval mole — before the Rosaura of his thoughts, a ripe, exquisite autumn fruit, don Camilo was seized with doubts. Could Rosaura be as culpable as the others? No. It was impossible. He made distinctions: "An accomplice, perhaps; chief conspirator, never." She, so gracious, so gentle, so pretty, so noble! Don Camilo recalled his own observations upon Rosaura's inexhaustible kindness. No. It was impossible. How could he have entertained the thought even for a minute! How base of him!

And even the thought of her complicity was gradually thrust aside as he thought of Rosaura's ingenuous gentleness and her moral beauty.

And at last he was thoroughly convinced that Rosaura — "the tool of her two sisters," — was not in the slightest to blame.

He concentrated all his hatred upon Eufemia and Alcira. If he could only free the victim from their clutches! But no, he was not made to be a redeemer. Redeemers die upon the cross. Let everybody take care of himself as best he can.

It was now thirteen afternoons since Irurtia had last visited the Agualongas; since his tacit break with Rosaura.

Thirteen afternoons: a century!

It was with this thought that don Camilo, at dusk, arrived at his home. While Tomasa prepared the meal, the money-lender sat down in the diminutive corridor without lighting the lamp.

From the dark heavens, where the moon shone like a presentiment, there fell into the tiny *patio* a clear shadow — an almost transparent shadow — a shadow that permitted one to see two or three metres into the darkness, though not distinctly.

A semi-obscurity most propitious to meditation! Don Camilo recalled that formerly he used to return to his house at precisely this hour; but at that time he invariably came back from Rosaura's home, his soul enwrapped in the haze of love.

He understood that this recollection now came to him because he missed those visits. And if he missed the visits it was because they gave him pleasure. Well, then — what had compelled him to eradicate that pleasure from his life — that pleasure which did not cost him even a cent? He could give himself no clear reply. Was it that they wished to

rob him? But who had said they wished to rob him? That the three received him together, and that such a reception was in reality a sinister attempt to force him into asking Rosaura's hand? But if he did not ask Rosaura's hand, those poor women, even if they were multiplied by twenty, even if they summoned all the saints of heaven to their assistance, as well as every terrestrial power, could not compel him to propose. Marriage was not compulsory in Venezuela, and it was in Venezuela that he lived.

He laughed at his former fears. It seemed impossible that he could have yielded to such an absurd notion. It seemed to him even less possible that he, Irurtia, a practical man, to whom two and two were four, and who didn't mistake a glass of water for the ocean, should have denied himself a real pleasure, a pleasure that did not cost anything, one of the few amenities of his existence. . . . And for what reason? Because of an absurd notion, a mere supposition, a chimera.

Which was to say that he, Irurtia, a practical man, had suppressed a genuine thing, a real thing, for less than a shadow, for something that really did not exist, for nothing at all. He could not explain it. "I must be getting old; my mind must be commencing to weaken; can I no longer be the same?" he asked himself.

Man of figures and mathematical precision that he was, don Camilo, in order to put himself to the test, formulated the following query: "Between Rosaura and my fortune, which do I prefer?"

The problem, as propounded, did not seem very

clear to him, so he put it in another way. He thought of Rosaura's mouth, of her arms, of the breasts which he could divine — firm, warm, curved, fragrant — beneath her flimsy muslin waists, and which impressed him so deeply. He imagined that those full lips of Rosaura were already pressing his own in the eagerness of a kiss; that those arms were around his neck; that those resilient breasts were playfully stroking his face, his chest, and dancing between his hands. Rosaura possessed, Rosaura his very own! Good God, the sensation was divine — such as he had never experienced before. . . . He remained in meditation. . . . Rosaura's image flared up in Irurtia's brain. From out of the shadows of the little *patio* Irurtia beheld issue an immense balance. Rosaura fell into one of the plates of the scales. Into the other plate he imagined that he heaped one house after the other that he owned. But this was not very clear. The plate could not hold a single house; how then pile on so many? Then, by a magic stroke of the imagination, he transformed the houses into gold. Now the affair was clear and exact. Into one of the plates there began to fall sacks filled with gold. And the scales inclined in the direction of the sacks of gold.

Irurtia now understood that he was saved; that he was proof against temptation, master of himself, the same Irurtia as ever. No, no. And to think that he had imagined himself growing senile!

Then, the better to prove his strength, his fortitude, his self-control, his former self, he began to remove sacks of gold from one plate, while Rosaura, whom he loved, remained wavering in the other.

He removed one, two; he removed twenty: and still the plate with the sacks of gold weighed more than that containing Rosaura!

At last there remained but a single sack of gold on one side, and on the other, Rosaura. And Rosaura weighed less than the sack.

Then Irurtia began to extract single gold ounces from the last sack. The sack, with the few gold pieces that remained, weighed more than Rosaura. He continued to take out one gold-piece after the other: the scales did not balance evenly.

At last there remained but a single ounce of gold, clean and shining, in one of the plates. That ounce of gold weighed more than Rosaura.

A voice woke him from this dream of money and love. The meal was ready and Tomasa was calling him to eat.

IV

ARDENT DEMOCRATIC CONTESTS

GENERAL CHICHARRA was one evening gathered with his family in the drawing-room when, at about ten o'clock, there was a knock at the street-door. It was a policeman. The officer handed a letter to the head of the house and left.

A corner of the envelope displayed the national coat-of-arms, and under the shield was printed: *From the President of the Republic.*

Chicharra became nervous and swelled with pride to be holding a letter from the President of the Republic. His emotion sent his blood surging, if not to his head, to the tip of his nose, and Aquiles' nasal appendage began to turn crimson.

Tearing open the envelope, Chicharra ran through the note in a second; and already having gathered the contents by sight, he began to read in a loud, clear, very audible voice, surrounded by the silent, eager attention of his family.

My dear friend:

Tomorrow at seven A.M. *we leave on a trip through the Aragua valleys. Would you care to join our party? There will be cock fights at Maracay, dances at La Victoria, bull-fighting at Turmero, an excursion to the lake of Tacarigua. We shall*

return within six or seven days. It will be a joyous holiday. Should you decide to come along, remember: be at the station tomorrow morning at seven.

What an outburst of joy in that household!

"The President is a most charming gentleman," said Aquiles' wife.

"Charming," repeated Tula, the eldest of the children. "And he's such an excellent dancer."

But Chicharra's exclamation drowned out every other remark:

"And how highly he esteems me! Can't you see what a high opinion he entertains of me? He couldn't be more affectionate to his own brother. I vow that there aren't three persons to whom our Chief Executive writes in his own handwriting a letter such as this."

"How he has changed toward you," ventured his wife.

Chicharra launched upon a series of eulogies. His family listened with sincere admiration and with mouths agape to this illustrious man, to whom the President wrote in his own handwriting and whose company the Chief Executive desired.

"Changed toward me? I should say he has! All I needed was a chance to get him alone and exchange a few words. The President appreciates merit and knows men. My enemies, fearing the influence that I might acquire over him, closed the door to me. They wouldn't let me get near to the President. They held him as if surrounded by a wall of iron. Not even my letters reached him: that's why I never

got any reply. Not even my most important political manifestations were heeded: the congratulations in the press on the banquet given to him on his birthday — that magnificent Liberal movement that I conceived and headed . . .

One of his younger daughters interrupted him:

"But your plan for a special ball won him around!"

Chicharra smiled; the whole family smiled at the recollection. That had been a stroke worthy of a Machiavelli — one of those ideas that rarely crosses the mind of a statesman.

"Maybe I don't know a thing or two about politics!" exclaimed Chicharra, more than ever satisfied with himself.

And indeed, Chicharra should have been very well acquainted with Venezuelan politics, since, being as slight and Sancho-like in spirit as in excellence, he always floated like a cork on the waters of the parties. And here he was now, congratulating himself upon the favor of the President, who could not bear the sight of him.

The recent ball had worked the miracle.

Never had the lascivious dance-maniac enjoyed himself better, to the sound of music, than on the night of Chicharra's ball, amid so many soft shoulders, so many half-nude bosoms, and so great an *odor de femina,* such a perfume of elegant women.

Those who took part in the famous quadrille were especially selected, and the oldest of them was Tula Chicharra, who was twenty-one or twenty-two at the most. The goat-footed dancer thought he would swoon against the firm, snowy flesh of Olga. At the

climactic moment of the figure, Olga breathed into his mouth, gazed into his eyes, and worked her charms upon him.

The libidinous creature felt the tempting flesh against his body, from his knees to his chest; against his right thigh he felt the contact of other women's legs; against his left, the warmth of other hips; at his back, the pressure of other perfumed curves; all around him, virginal bosoms. . . . He thought he would go mad. Never had he experienced such a sensation of elegance, voluptuousness, music and love.

It had cost Chicharra much labor indeed to find maidens to take part in the complicated and bold dance of his invention. At last, three of his daughters, Olga, and several daughters of those noble liberals who aspired to public office and had signed the manifesto of loyalty, accepted. But not all the liberals accepted. There were some who fretted and fumed, and one went so far as to cry that his daughters weren't professional bacchantes, nor morsels for fauns, nor food for lewd men, and that Aquiles was a shameless wretch.

What trouble was caused for Chicharra by the mere divulgation of his ideas! Who could have been the tactless person to have let the plan slip out? Perhaps Rata — thought Chicharra to himself — in order to let folks see that he was in touch with social secrets, just to give himself airs.

At any rate, before the date of the ball Chicharra was showered with scorn. He even began to fear that none of the invited guests would appear, and surely enough there were more elderly men and

women than members of the younger social set. Very few men brought their families. The men came alone, offering excuses: "My wife's been ill for two days." Or: "My daughter, at the very last moment, was seized with a violent headache." The families of other men had gone to Macuto. Each one, as he entered presented an excuse similar to that just given, if, indeed, not an identical one. This roused laughter, and Aquiles, somewhat abashed, thought: "They're all a rabble with little imagination."

But the outcome of the feast compensated him for all his efforts. How joyous the President was!

That night Chicharra's star began to shine. The official procurers paled with envy. The inventor of that marvellous quadrille was overriding them all.

Now the President was going on a trip through the Aragua valleys, and wished Aquiles to accompany him. Who was there better fitted to direct the quadrille he had invented in the balls that would take place on the road! It was very frequently that the President went on what might be called these excursions, or pleasure tours.

No sooner had he read the presidential note than Aquiles Chicharra understood what was desired of him and why he was invited. He was in the seventh heaven of delight, knowing that out of these panderings and intimacies arose ministers, sectional presidents, customs chiefs, and all the personages of the administration.

Chicharra gave orders to prepare his valise at once. And while this was being attended to he began

to meditate in a pose that should impress the family; that is to say, with his head in his hands.

La Victoria was, in the President's tours, the center of the Saturnalia, and it was in this important center of politics, in this capital of vice, in this nest of degradation (not with reference to the people itself, alien to all this vice, and the victim of the ruffians, but referring to the satrap of that satrapy) that Chicharra was to fight it out with the monopolist of the bacchantes, the chief of pimps, Francisco Linares Alcántara, hermaphrodite and thug, elevated to the category of highest authority in the state of Aragua.

He prepared in advance for the contest. He would fight. One contest more or less meant nothing to him. He was a fighter.

Francisco Linares Alcántara, or, as he was always called, Alcantarilla, had been informed by telephone from Caracas, as soon as the train left the station, just who comprised the party.

No sooner had he heard the name of Chicharra, which, since the night of the ball, had been very much mentioned and spread by the President's cohort of intimates and lickspittles, than the eunuch's face altered color. A rival had entered the arena. Happily this struggle of influences and skirts was to be waged on territory that he knew better than the adversary. Against wind and tide he would preserve his position as the first, most celebrated and best equipped of all panderers.

Not for nothing was he the chief authority in Aragua, having at his disposal in La Victoria (in addition to his own court of minions for his personal

use, who did anything to give him pleasure) that other band of procurers who recognized him as their head and protector — the band to whom the President of the Republic owed so many an exquisite morsel, and to whom he himself, Alcantarilla, was indebted for such great prestige and influence.

Fortunately an excellent bit of prey had already been held in waiting for the faun of this occasion, even before Alcántara had been informed of Chicharra's early arrival.

The victim was a country girl, as fresh and beautiful as a mayflower. Alcantarilla placed great hopes in her.

It was about twelve when the President arrived at La Victoria.

He desired to take a bath before lunch and they prepared him a bath containing more cologne water than ordinary water. Alcantarilla, doing everything in lavish manner, spared no expense. He was resolved to eclipse Chicharra.

After lunch the President went for a nap to the rooms on the first floor, accompanied by Alcantarilla and three cronies. There he threw himself into a hammock; while he rested, Alcantarilla set about to rouse the concupiscence and the curiosity of the salacious personage by indirect hints.

"My general," he began, "there are Moors off the coast."

Another of those present added:

"The President will smack his lips with pleasure."

The faun cocked his ear, and asked:

"Very young?"

"Of course. The kind you like."

"Brunette?"

"A beauty."

"Tall, slender? Plump, short?"

"Tall and strong; looks like a regular tower. Figure, neck, arms and hips of the most entrancing sort."

"In other words, a *bocato di cardenale?*"

"Yes sir; a cardinal's morsel."

The President feigned anger:

"Then what the deuce do you mean by not bringing her to me?"

Alcantarilla replied emphatically:

"No, no, my general. Even though you command me. It will be the first time that I disobey you; but I will disobey. Tell me to throw myself over the balcony, and I'll do so. Tell me to cut off my mother's head, and I'll cut it off. But don't tell me to bring the girl now, for I will not do it. You have just had your lunch."

"That's a mere trifle, Panchito."

"No, my President. Not in your case. I, Pedro, Juan or any other common fellow may *go horseback riding* after meals: it doesn't matter. But not you."

Another of the cronies made the matter clearer:

"It's true: your health, General, belongs to the country."

And another, still more vile, urged the point further:

"Your health is even more important than the health of the nation." [18]

[18] Historical fact. Heard by the author of these pages, at La Victoria, from the lips of Senator Manuel M. Azpurua, brother-in-law of Alcantarilla.

Alcantarilla, who did not wish to be outdone, said:

"After God, it's I who watch over your life."

At this juncture voices were heard at the bottom of the staircase.

It was Chicharra who wished to go up to the President's room. A porter, stationed there by Alcantarilla with express orders not to let him pass, was barring his way.

Alcantarilla looked out of a window to see what was taking place; he took advantage of the opportunity to send a poisoned arrow in the direction of his rival:

"It's nothing; merely Chicharra disputing with a servant."

And after a second he added:

"The poor fellow is so vainglorious! Once, when he was a minister, he had to be silenced and cast aside because he was telling everybody that he was directing the affairs of the nation, in proof of which he divulged state secrets.

The President smiled.

Alcantarilla could not very well tell whether the smile condemned Chicharra or not. He had just sown a seed of mistrust and discredit; but it was not enough, and he added, as if to sound the attitude of the omnipotent executive:

"After all, Chicharra is an excellent Liberal and a magnificent chap."

"The President not wishing to commit himself, kept on smoking and his head swayed from side to side; he neither assented nor denied. Then, in a benevolent mood, he said:

"He's a good fellow."

"A confession," thought Alcantarilla. "He doesn't esteem Chicharra very highly yet, but he's beginning to. He doesn't count him for as much, though, as I feared he did. That clay figure must be smashed as far as the President is concerned."

The latter, swaying gently to and fro in the hammock, now quite drowsy, insisted:

"Chicharra — a general without any campaigns. But a fine fellow. The quadrille he invented simply could not be improved upon."

Alcantarilla, without appearing to do so, cast a furtive eye in the President's direction. He drank, rather than heard, the excutive's words; and he weighed, by half-drachms, as in a pharmacist's balance, every gesture of the magistrate — every glance, and even the inflexions of his voice. He was now sure of his opinion. Chicharra was not so much to be feared as he had at first imagined; but it would be well to get him safely out of the way. An unscrupulous rascal beside a vicious degenerate is always a danger.

In the most natural manner in the world, he said:

"You are right, my General, Chicharra is an excellent person. As a family man there's none better. In his house they adore him. And he's as serviceable as he is respectful to all the presidents. That's why I am all the more surprised that he should make such a noise, almost starting a scandal, while you're here and knowing as he does that you've retired for an afternoon nap."

The man in the hammock yawned. He was sleepy. His intimates prepared to leave. Alcanta-

rilla himself drew the curtains to and shut the blinds. The room was plunged into semi-obscurity. The President closed his eyes.

A moment after he had left, Alcantarilla, turning back from the staircase, entered the room anew and announced:

"General Chicharra desires to come up. Shall I tell him to enter?"

"No, not now," replied the President, yawning.

"He insists, my General."

"Let him not be a boresome fool."

After his siesta, at about five, the President went out for a jaunt on horseback.

A bull-fight had been arranged in his honor. Although he himself did not practise felling bulls by twisting their tails, he always enjoyed the sight of men on horseback pursuing the bull and throwing him to the ground by this method . . . if they could. At times the bull turned on them furiously. What a whirlwind of horses and riders there was then! "It's a very characteristic game of ours," the President would say. "That's why I'm so fond of it."

When, at dusk, he returned from the bull festival and penetrated into his rooms, he was greeted with a surprise. There was a woman inside.

He approached resolutely, and questioned her with the greatest tenderness. He understood: it was Alcantarilla's surprise.

He surveyed her. Tall, strong, proud, attractive, of rustic beauty, this poor peasant girl, all dressed up for the occasion, not knowing what she had been brought thither for, or what she was to do, inspired

him more with pity than desire. He asked, affectionately:

"What's your name?"

She replied:

"María-Juana González. And yours?"

The President could not restrain his smile; approaching the girl he said, as his only reply:

"You're very pretty."

Now it was she who smiled in her turn, although she did not know just what the whole business meant. Why had they put her into this man's rooms?

Having now approached close to the maiden, the President took the liberty of stroking her cheeks with his right hand, almost paternally. The girl pushed him away; but he was able to note that her skin, though not quite soft, was agreeable to the touch, with the freshness of a mountain palmetto of eighteen to twenty years. And he thought: "What kind of breasts has she got?" In order to find out, he drew closer still, and more skilfully than at first, slid his hand along her body; the mountain maiden, however, drawing herself erect, gave him a powerful shove.

Now angered, he tried to dominate her and rushed upon her. The girl, terrified, raised a shout and began to run hither and thither about the room, trying to reach the door and escape her pursuer.

Nobody answered her cries, nobody came to her aid. In the meantime this man continued to pursue her.

Hounded like a wild beast in the arena, backed into a corner, the peasant-girl instinctively stretched

forth her hand in search of something with which to defend herself, and seizing a cane, the property of the President himself, she belabored the satyr with two or three resounding blows.

The blood began to flow from the bald presidential pate, streaking his skull, his forehead, his mustache and his beard. The impetus of the persecution ceased as by a charm. The peasant-maiden took advantage of the truce and fled toward the door.

At last the cronies arrived. The President, badly bruised and confused, began to wash his wound.

When Alcantarilla appeared, the satyr reproved him:

"That's no woman; that's a wild bull."

Chicharra himself took charge of washing the wound, ordering in desperate tones:

"Fetch balsam, perchloride of iron, lint, a doctor, ten doctors . . ."

Some ran downstairs, others rummaged through the drawers, as if the dressing-table were an apothecary shop. Above all the confusion could be heard Chicharra's anxious voice:

"A doctor. At once! Fetch a doctor!"

The President, without a word, retired to his hammock. His silence was aglow with lightning flashes.

Alcantarilla felt sad and humiliated, conquered. He had thought that beast of a woman an angel. They had deceived him; but they'd hear from him. He'd teach them manners and raise a rumpus.

Chicharra intervened:

"No. Don't do anything like that. It would have an unfavorable effect upon our President's

cause. And I am sure that your intention is quite the opposite. But we must take care, ever so much care — more care than is taken here with the Chief of the nation. It won't do to shut him into a room with the first woman that happens along."

"I was remiss in my duty," confessed Alcantarilla. "My duty was to remain at the door, awaiting results."

"That's what I would have done," assured Chicharra.

They spoke in loud, coarse tones, so that the wounded man should hear them from the adjoining room.

On the following day Andrés Rata's officious sheet published a long telegram from Aquiles Chicharra. Here it was reported that the President had been attacked by a madwoman during a charitable visit to her. He had escaped with his life only by a miracle.

Chicharra sent another despatch which Andrés Rata likewise inserted, with appropriate comment. This second telegram was directed to the Archbishop of Caracas, urging him to sing a *Te Deum* as a mark of gratitude to the Almighty for having preserved the existence of so illustrious and well-deserving a governor.

Below the second telegram Andrés Rata placed the Archbishop's reply.

On the following Sunday, to add to the solemnity, the *Te Deum* would take place. Would that God ever preserved, with such patent favor as on the present occasion, the life of the glorious magistrate, of the model president, of that hero endowed with

so many signal public and private virtues. The Lord protects the righteous.

Nothing more was needed. From all points of the republic there began to pour in at once, signed by Chicharras and Alcántaras of the provinces, congratulations to the President upon his lucky escape "through the visible protection of Providence." These despatches were published for week after week by Andrés Rata in his newspaper.

In every church of the republic the *Te Deum* was sung.

Days afterward, having returned to Caracas, Aquiles Chicharra went to visit the chief magistrate; he spoke to him of the great movement of popular opinion that had been so skilfully manipulated, and concluded by affirming his allegiance in the following terms:

"Actions speak louder than words,[19] my President."

The magistrate replied:

"Don't imagine that I'll forget this. Inside of two weeks you'll be a minister. But don't breathe a word of it to anybody."

[19] The original here reads *Obras sen amores,* which is the first part of the proverb, *Obras son amores, que no buenas razones.* The implication, like that of the English proverb used in the present text, is, of course, that deeds are more substantial than fine talk.

V

CIRILO IN TROUBLE

CIRILO MATAMOROS in prison! Who could ever believe it! Yet it was so.

Two gendarmes came to his native Chacao to hunt him up, and pulled him out of his humble home. Out of the *pulpería* came Cirilo between the two officers, headed for La Rotunda, or Caracas's prison.

Cirilo Matamoros, the peon's healer, the benefactor of the poor, that Providence of the destitute and the ailing — what had he committed to deserve the privations of the cell and iron clutch of the State about his throat?

Nothing; or, more properly stated, he had done what he had been doing up to then, conscientiously and patiently, for everybody: practise his medicine. And it was this practising of medicine that had, at the moment least expected, led him to jail.

It was all don Camilo's fault. At least, that was what Matamoros really believed in his heart, and so Olga assured him.

After his tacit break with Rosaura, after that long interval during which he did not visit the sisters, don Camilo returned — how could he help himself? — to the home of the Agualongas.

He was sure of himself. Let the three of them receive him together; let a thousand receive him;

let them riddle him with darts; let them drive him between the sword and the wall. . . . All would be useless; it would all be only a waste of time and effort. Don Camilo was sure of himself. He would do only what he meant and cared to do. He was stronger than love.

As an excuse for re-establishing relations and resuming his former visits he seized upon a piece of bad news: Eufemia, some days before, had been forced to take to bed.

Don Camilo found a large assembly of old folks in the Agualonga home; the greater number of these he did not know even by name. He was introduced; but Irurtia, awkward and timid, felt ill at ease among these old women, some of them grave, and after some twenty minutes, he bid adieu and left.

He had come solely to inquire about doña Eufemia's health. He had learned of her illness only by accident. Andrés Rata, whom he had met in the street the previous evening, had told him the news. As he was much concerned, he would return.

Two afternoons later he indeed returned.

He was surprised to find a larger number of old women than the first time, and among them, like verdant isles in a gray sea, like an oasis amidst a sandy desert, various young women. There were also a few gentlemen.

Why all these persons? He soon discovered. Eufemia had not improved. Her stomach, her hypochondria, old age; a complication of years, physical misery, mental vexations and chronic dyspepsia had prostrated her and was now getting the best of her. Poor Eufemia! Her sisters swore that

it was all due to her grief upon having left the old manorial dwelling. Ever since the removal she had stopped eating: days had passed without her taking more than a soft-boiled egg — she had not ceased to suffer, spending night after night in tears — she had not cared to speak to anybody, having refused to stir from her room and resisted all efforts to get her to say a few words. Poor Eufemia!

Early in the evening of that day Irurtia returned to the Agualonga home.

Andrés Rata, catching sight of him, approached him solicitously, and don Camilo felt happy to meet somebody with whom he could exchange a few words, among so many persons whom he knew very little or not at all.

"Is she very seriously ill?" he asked the youth.

"Yes, indeed, don Camilo. That old woman has packed her valise for the long trip and there's nobody can detain her now."

"Too bad!"

"What do you mean, 'too bad'? She's lived long enough. To lead an existence such as hers is ridiculous: weep, pray, barely eat, hardly say a word. What's the use of living under such conditions?"

At this moment Rosaura entered from an adjoining room, her eyes red with weeping.

Andrés Rata went over to her:

"Come and greet don Camilo for an instant."

"I can't now," she replied. "I'm going for some medicine."

Then Rata, almost holding her back, nodded to Irurtia. The latter approached, very solicitously. How badly he felt that the patient should not be

rapidly improving! And how it grieved him to see Rosaura suffering so! The old man's sincerity was evident in his very tones.

"Thank you ever so much, don Camilo. I know that you've called several times. Now permit me to leave you for a moment. I'm going for medicine."

She left without another word. . . . A minute later she returned, with a flask in her hand.

Irurtia and Rata stopped her again.

An idea had suddenly flashed upon don Camilo, and he told it to Rosaura, not without hesitation and fear of a brusk repulse: Why did they not get Cirilo Matamoros to prescribe for the sick woman?

He had to explain who Matamoros was. Irurtia assured her that he himself had blind confidence in the man — an absolute confidence in the mestee's skill and lore. That fellow realized miraculous cures. He himself had seen the doctor stop a hemorrhage by means of an *aporó* wash and an external application of herbs — all in less than a quarter of an hour. In any event, since all the medicine given her up to now had proved of no avail to Eufemia, and as the physicians could not get her out of bed, what would be lost in consulting Matamoros?

The idea seemed absurd to Rosaura. Not wishing to hurt don Camilo she sought some subterfuge to soften her refusal, and said:

"Your idea is excellent; but I'm afraid it can't be done. You know what doctors are like; you know their professional jealousy and how peevish they can be in such matters. We can't offend our physician, who has been with us for many years."

Irurtia did not insist; but Andrés Rata, in order

to flatter don Camilo, expressed the belief that the idea was not only excellent, but easily practicable:

"If the family is agreeable," he offered, "I'll see to putting it through. You can easily offer the physician some excuse or other, and that will be sufficient. We needn't drown in a glass of water."

Rosaura, in order to escape the issue, hastened to leave, assuring the men that her opinions were of no value.

"Rather consult Alcira and Olga," she added.

It was very easy for don Camilo to satisfy Olga, and to convince the family. Matamoros was sent for.

The following morning Cirilo arrived, examined the sick woman, returned to Chacao and prepared a potion. That afternoon they gave the beverage to Eufemia. That very night Eufemia died.

The regular physician, behind whose back Matamoros had been brought in, no sooner learned of this secret treatment than he foamed with rage and with fury, despite his patriarchal years, which did not seem to permit of such a venting of vanity or such a free rein to anger. To think that he had been set aside for a vile quack! It was impossible to tolerate such an enormous insult! And to make matters worse, the barbarian had killed the woman, who was already on the road to recovery.

The infuriated Galen addressed a convincing and peremptory communication to the Academy of Medicine, concerning the quack of Chacao. What a list of charges! Besides having for a long time past practised medicine illegally, to the scandal of science and the disgrace of the medical profession,

Matamoros could this time be convicted of homicide through sheer ignorance in the case of Eufemia Agualonga.

The Academy of Medicine, aroused and zealous in defence of its field, celebrated a solemn session, and that solemn session resulted in an official complaint of the Academy against Matamoros, the arrest of the latter by the civil authorities, and his being placed on trial.

The matter caused a great scandal. Cirilo's picture appeared in the papers; his life and the tale of his wonderful cures was related, and into the account of Matamoros' most recent curative adventures, there were brought the names of Tomasa, Irurtia and the Agualongas.

Rosaura and Alcira were not permitted to read the daily press, nor did they care to, bowed down as they were with grief at the loss of Eufemia; but Rosaura, who learned of the imprisonment of Matamoros and the proceedings against him, and who considered him innocent of her sister's death, begged Irurtia:

"See, don Camilo, if you and Aquiles can't save this poor señor Matamoros from a long sentence."

Don Camilo, vexed by the newspaper publicity — which upset him altogether — and eager to please Rosaura, set about to silence the press as much as possible, and to win Matamoros' liberation. He would tell Rosaura later what he had done: how, with the aid of Andrés Rata and General Chicharra, he had hushed the press, which was beginning to print the names of the Agualongas very often. Rosaura would be very grateful to him for this favor. He knew that well.

By taking Matamoros' side he would gain a double advantage, and don Camilo saw this phase of the matter very clearly. First, should the trial be nolprossed, don Camilo's name would cease to be bandied about in the newspapers, and don Camilo would thus be spared hours of anguish. He considered the press with such a mingling of hatred and fear! The publication of his name had always pleased him so little! Then Rosaura. . . . He felt more than ever smitten: he wished to please her so that he might expect some sentimental recompense. Nobody could tell how far Rosaura's gratitude might reach. She was so good! . . . And women are such strange creatures! . . . Although several times he did ask himself: "What the devil do I need Rosaura's gratitude for? What am I to do with her love?"

Even before they had produced any results, Irurtia, through Olga, began tactfully to try and turn his future labors for Matamoros' freedom to advantage. Olga, who knew Irurtia, said to him, without being able to restrain herself:

"But don Camilo, if anybody should be directly concerned in Matamoros' release, it's not Rosaura, nor I, nor anybody else except you. Its' your fault, in fact, that he's now in prison."

And then, dropping honey upon the aloes, in order not to offend the broker irrevocably, she added:

"We'll all be deeply indebted to you and uncle Aquiles if this matter is hushed up and Eufemia ceases to serve as a topic for unimaginative journalists with nothing to say and no news to write."

And in her heart Olga thought:

"Irurtia's hopes in regard to my godmother's gratitude don't appear very logical; in short, a lover's reasoning. This old duffer sometimes strikes me as being silly, or else he believes other folk silly. He forgets that the net result of his activities will be to stimulate Andrés to discuss the matter with his journalistic friends and to get uncle Aquiles to induce the President to pour oil upon the waters; and he forgets, above all, that I can achieve both results as well as he. The sole thing that will come out intact from all this effort in behalf of a wretched prisoner, is one of the corners of Irurtia's moral being: his calculating egotism. He is incapable of lifting a finger without measuring his gain beforehand — without first computing how many per cent profit his action may bring him. What a don Camilo! Besides, he's head over heels in love with my godmother. He acts like a novice in love; he never showed his feelings so plainly. The rogue can no longer conceal his desires. He's lost."

Nevertheless, despite her understanding that don Camilo was plainly lost, as she put it, Olga, through a certain complication of vanity, congratulated herself on having guessed the hopes and discovered the thoughts of the money-lender.

A secret in the possession of a scheming woman is at times equivalent to a compass, and at others, to a cannon. Was this secret going to serve Olga as a weapon or a guide? She could not yet tell; but it was certainly going to be of some use to her in the present case.

Yes; she was happy to know Irurtia's thoughts.

Irurtia was really in love with Rosaura; and like every lover, he had become timid, bold, contradictory, absurd. All the better: this was the road to matrimony. All he needed was a skilful shove. Ah! And also to win over her godmother! But it was enough to see clearly into the broker's heart. Let them call her schemer; She went straight after her goal — the end justified the means.

Don Camilo did not forget Matamoros.

The first person that came to the prison cell after Matamoros' wife was Irurtia.

Matamoros was filled with high hope and the heavens seemed to open when he heard don Camilo's promises.

"I know almost nobody in Caracas," he said, plaintively. "How I appreciate everything you promise to do for me."

And depicting the gravity of his case, he added:

"The worst of it is that, according to what I've been told, they've indicted me for illegal practise of medicine. The day before yesterday I made a statement."

Irurtia knew all about it from the newspapers.

"That doesn't matter," he assured the prisoner. "You are not guilty. I have already spoken to General Chicharra and I'll speak to him again. He'll pull wires with the President."

Don Camilo took his leave, still encouraging the imprisoned man:

"Hold firm, friend Matamoros. Your case is a good one. And depend upon me to do all I possibly can."

To Matamoros it seemed as if the world were fall-

ing on top of him. His property forsaken, his store closed, his household in tears; he, so accustomed to the freedom of the country and to personal liberty, in a stone cage! And all for what? For having done good all his life, succoring the pain of so many wretched creatures; for having studied the properties of plants and turned them to the advantage of unhappy persons; for having dried so many tears, returned health to so many ailing ones, vigor to so many bodies, joy and the blessings of God to so many homes! What had he done, finally? He had obeyed a summons from Caracas; he had placed at the service of persons whom he did not know, and at the disposition of a dying woman whom God Himself could not have saved, his good will and his curative concoctions. And how was society rewarding him! Did he deserve to be proceeded against like a bandit and be caged like a tiger? He could not believe it all. Society was unjust toward him — unjust and cruel.

Among the circumstances that most vexed him in prison were the gibes of a cheap doctor who was detained there for having brought about an abortion for a certain strumpet. The abortion had cost the one her life and the other his freedom.

This man, who hired out what he had learned in the universities to persons desiring crimes such as abortion, to poke fun at him, who had labored only to do good and had never accepted anything for his services!

The cheap doctor, indeed, listened disdainfully to the virtues of each plant. His tiny mind of a Venezuelan physician — that is to say, of a tutored

idiot — knew only what he learned from European books, what men of other lands had discovered and what he repeated like a parrot — while Cirilo Matamoros, a hundred times more intelligent, had studied Nature in his own country and had discovered for himself the secrets of what existed about him, of his native flora.

"Very well," admitted the medicaster, putting on airs, "I grant that you may diagnose the patient's malady correctly and that you know what native remedy to apply. But how can you apply these remedies in the proper quantities if you are ignorant of scientific weights and measures?"

"You are mistaken."

"No, sir, I am not mistaken; for you speak to me, for example, of a *glass* of water, of a *handful* of borage, a *pinch* of cinammon, a *spoonful* of syrup. Now *spoons, pinches, handfuls* and *glasses* aren't scientific measures."

The prisoners who listened to the debate admired the doctor and showed their disdain for Matamoros.

"They may not be scientific," retorted the latter, "but they are the sort that our people understands, and it's the people that I prescribe for. The peasants wouldn't understand me if I spoke of drachms, half-drachms, grams, grains, nor, perhaps, of ounces."

The vain little doctor scoffed at him:

"That's true: they wouldn't understand . . . nor would you."

The bystanders' smiles served as a stimulus and as applause to him.

Cirilo, piqued, tried in his turn to show what he

knew, and to evade the scorn and the gibes that always seasoned the university man's talk.

"It's not that I'm ignorant of the scientific weights and measurements, doctor," he said, "but that you're ignorant of the popular ones. They are so simple. Just see: *a little coffee-spoon,* for example holds twenty grams of water, or sixteen grams of any oil. A *glass* contains eight soup-spoonfuls. Eight spoonfuls, that is to say, one hundred and sixty grams. That's the simplest way. A *glass:* one hundred and sixty grams of water; more or less, that's five ounces."

"But that accounts for only three measurements; all liquid. I don't suppose you're going to take cornstalk fodder by the spoonfuls."

The bystanders laughed.

Cirilo felt very much like replying: "Cornstalk fodder is only for asses . . . and for medicasters of your type." But controlling himself he went on:

"As for the other measurements, my dear doctor, it is done in the same way: they all have their equivalents. A *pinch,* which is to say, the amount of powder that can be taken between the index and the thumb, ordinarily weighs about six grains. The *handful,* which is to say, what can be seized in the hand, corresponds to an ounce and two-and-a-half drachms of leaves or of dry flowers — to an ounce and a half of any dry root, and, if it's a question of dry bark, to two ounces."

"From what I can make out, you weigh things only when they're dry. Suppose they're fresh?"

"If they're fresh they weigh about twice as much, whether you're dealing with barks, roots, herbs or flowers."

"They weigh twice as much, do they, Matamoros? And who vouches for the truth of all this?

"Nobody. . . . Experience."

The puffed-up little doctor then said that Matamoros found an answer for everything — that he argued more volubly than a pettifogger.

"If you had gone in for law and chicanery rather than for witchcraft or quack doctoring, you would have made a pile more of money and you wouldn't be here now weeping the death of the Agualonga woman."

One day, when the conversation had turned to territory on which he trod with more confidence, and where he could propound with an excess of pedantry and lack of discernment everything that he had learned from the college text-books, the medicaster of the abortion, recalling Tomasa's rheumatism, which Cirilo had previously mentioned, exclaimed:

"Very well, Cirilo, you who advise and treat the broker's old housekeeper — tell me frankly: Do you know what rheumatism is?"

"I should say I did."

"And do you know the etiological or pathogenic connection between rheumatism and arthritis, tabes, hemiplegia, syringomyelia?"

"No I don't, nor do I need to."

The prisoners, who, as soon as the men got to discussing, that is, to tilting, invariably formed a circle about the disputing doctors, would just as invariably take the side of the vainglorious charlatan.

Cirilo's honest confession in regard to his ignorance of these complications of rheumatism called forth an outburst of laughter from the bystanders.

This Cirilo, ever since he had come into La Rotunda a few days before, had been the joy of the prison; not in himself, but as the butt of the other doctor's gibes. He was the circus, the amusement of the jail.

The conceited university pedant, abandoning for this day his supercilious jesting tone, and penetrated with the notion of his own importance, lifted his hands to his head in horror at the honest confession of ignorance which Cirilo made.

"And you pretend to cure Irurtia's old domestic without knowing the affinities of syringomyelia, tabes and arthritis to rheumatism! Do you know at least, how many classes of chronic rheumatism there are?"

Receiving a sincere, negative reply from Matamoros, the medicaster of the abortion case began to expounded in a conscientious, methodical manner:

"Very well, then; neurologists demonstrate that certain cases of chronic arthritis depend upon central or periferal nervous lesions, and that others are due to hysteria. As to cases of chronic rheumatism, there exist three groups: 1st, *chronic deforming rheumatism;* 2nd, polymorphic arthropathies from the clinical point of view, of the same nature as *plain rheumatism;* 3rd, *gouty rheumatism,* characteristic of persons suffering from arthritis and indicative of malnutrition. Do you know to which of these groups your patient belongs?"

"All I know is that she's improving under my treatment."

"She's improving? Yes; pretty soon she won't need your remedies at all, as she'll follow the same road as señora Agualonga."

The listeners burst into laughter. Matamoros, provoked, withdrew from the group grumbling.

Since that time, not caring to serve as the target of their hilarity, he chose not to answer the petty physician.

No sooner did he catch sight of him in one corner of the prison than Cirilo walked to the opposite side.

The inexhaustible verborrhea and even the mere presence of the dolt constituted to Cirilo one of the most distasteful aspects of prison life. At least he enwrapped himself in a classic silence as in a toga. Nobody could get another word out of him. He looked upon all the prisoners as his enemies; every one of them, in greater or less degree made fun of him or wished to do so.

Poor, stiff-haired Matamoros, who always looked like a wild animal, now appeared for all the world like a caged tiger.

In the meantime the days passed by and Irurtia's promises showed no sign of becoming realities.

VI

DON CAMILO DE ORO

IT is between three and half-past three of the afternoon. The sun is already guiding its steeds westward and filters slantingly into Irurtia's bedchamber, inundating it with light and warmth. The brightness enters in a thick stream of sunlight, and in this flood of light there rises from the frayed, yellowish bed a swarm of darting, agile atoms and particles.

From within come the sounds of Tomasa's limping steps; she has been about since finishing her noon-day nap, hobbling hither and thither, warming her bandage cloth in the oven, or getting ready to wash in the warm hours of the afternoon. During the warm hours she can, at least, be free of the worst pains of her rheumatism, while she wets, presses and bleaches towels, tablecloths, kitchen cloths, her own skirts and Irurtia's shirts.

Irurtia, in the center of the room, has just finished dressing for the street, where his regular affairs await him.

Ever since he has fallen in love, he has gradually became transformed, without realizing it, not into a fop exactly, but certainly into a more careful dresser and one attentive to the effect of his clothes upon the fair sex; now he was wont to spend more time in his toilette than usual.

He had purchased a little sixty-*céntimo* mirror from one of the numerous Turkish hawkers that carry their stock upon their backs through Caracas, going from door to door selling baubles. Never before had he bought a looking-glass. For shaving purposes he had always used the cracked and tarnished *peseta* mirror that Tomasa had presented to him, placing it above the wobbly old washstand that at the same time served him as a dressing-table. But that mirror scarcely reflected his face, so permanent and longstanding was the eclipse. It might well be said that Irurtia shaved himself by memory.

He had another looking-glass, a round, miniature, pocket-size affair, that had come into his hands on a certain carnival day, without his quite being aware just how. These articles were used by a cigarette factory as an attractive means of advertisement, and were distributed to the passers-by on that holiday. Without trying to get one, Irurtia had somehow or other found one in his hand; and to tell the truth, it was of more use to him, despite its tiny proportions, than his opaque, half-blind mirror. At least, he could see a clear reflection of himself in it. But everything in this world is frail and perishable, even presentation mirrors handed out on carnival days, and on one sad day it was broken into bits.

Irurtia was placing into his closet his new little glass — the one he had bought from the Turk — after having surveyed himself for a long time, and twirled the sparse gray hairs of his moustache conscientiously, when he heard the noise of a coach stopping before his door, or not far away. "Can it be

for me?" he thought, hoping that it would not be. Two loud knocks answered that it was for him.

He turned the shutters to discover who was knocking, before he should let the visitor cross his threshold, in case it should be a trustworthy person. Who could it be?

It was no less a personage than the illustrious, never-sufficiently-estimated General Aquiles Chicharra.

"I am brought here," began the newcomer, "by a business matter of the utmost urgency; an affair of transcendent import, to me, to you, to the President of the Republic, to the Liberal Party and to the entire nation."

Don Camilo grew alarmed, unaccustomed to such solemn preambles. Chicharra continued his exordium of soapy pomposity.

Somewhat confused, Irurtia confessed:

"Frankly, General, I don't understand a word."

"You'll very soon understand, friend Irurtia. I can't bring you to a realization of such a vast proposition in a trice."

Chicharra continued in his rhetorical digressions:

"You know, don Camilo, that I am a friend of yours: a true, a good, a great friend."

"I don't doubt it for a moment, my dear General, not for a moment. . . ."

Irurtia had suddenly been drenched in a downpour of ice-cold water that froze him. His mistrust, awakening, put him on guard. He believed that Chicharra had come to ask him for a loan. If not, then why all these protestations of friendship and these preliminaries before coming to the business

proposition? For Chicharra had clearly used the word "business." The word still echoed in his ears. Now that he was on guard and prepared to defend his money, Irurtia, aggressive as ever, declared:

"Very well, General; let's get to the point. What do you wish of me? How can I be of service to you?"

"It's not I whom you can serve; it's the President of the Republic, the Liberal Party, the Fatherland."

"It must be some loan to the President," thought the usurer, growing more and more angry. "I can't escape this."

"I ask nothing of the Fatherland," he replied, "nor of the Liberal Party, nor of the President of the Republic. Nor have they anything to require of me. . . . That's my opinion."

"Blasphemy!" shouted Chicharra. "Then know that the President, representing the Fatherland, and I, representing the Liberal Party, have remembered you."

Now Irurtia began to believe that he was to be decorated with the bust of the Liberator.

But he was not certain. His shirt-button, full of curiosity, drew the huge head of his collar-button forward through the celluloid collar. Irurtia, all eyes, twisted his fingers, wriggled his legs, shrinking, until he seemed to be undergoing a metamorphosis — as if he had decided to lose his human semblance and be transformed into a fantastic rodent. It might have been imagined that the rodent, avidly attacking the lardaceous Chicharra, was gnawing at Aquiles' rubicund nose; that, having penetrated through his navel, it had made its way through the

various kilometers of belly until it issued from that part where most men have their brains, but where the rodent found only a viscous mass of a color between white and green, quite similar to the matter secreted by pituitary noses and tubercular throats.

A decoration — a loan — what had this chatterbox of the insipid, involved, vacuous prologues come to announce to him? That they had remembered him! He could not help asking with mingled surprise and curiosity:

"But *why* have you remembered me?"

At last Chicharra condescended to speak plainly, and in a few words he explained the object of his coming. It was certainly time that he did.

It concerned the appointment of don Camilo Irurtia to the position of Minister of Finance.

There was a ministerial crisis. Chicharra, the future Minister of Internal Relations, had learned from the President in confidence the difficulty involved in naming a Minister of Finance. The President, perplexed as to a choice, complained that there were no financiers in Venezuela, and that though the country would have a Ministry of Finance, there would always be lacking a Minister, despite the fact that some individual would bear the title.

It was then that Chicharra had suggested the nomination of don Camilo Irurtia. The President had not even heard of the name. Whereupon Chicharra, desiring it to appear that he was serving the President, or with a sincere desire to serve him, lest the latter should imagine that the future Minister of Internal Relations was a fellow who did not

have at hand a solution for any number of problems that should arise — and perhaps, in his heart, eager to have it known that he had recommended a Minister of Finance and had obtained the election of his candidate — spoke up for the broker, exaggerating matters as much as he could, embellishing him with excellent qualities and multiple talents. In his own way he related the tale of the usurer's life, in pompous, encomiastic terms. He was a financier of the highest type. The President slily asked:

"And where may this pearl be hidden? How is it that previous administrations have not employed the skill of this man?"

He was anxious to meet him and speak with him.

No less vain than Chicharra, though not anywhere nearly such a fool, the President believed that merely by seeing Irurtia he could discover whether he was a genuine financier or only sham; at least, he believed, he could tell whether he could develop this hoarder into a Minister of the Treasury.

"Provided he holds on to the State's money as well as he does to his own," he said, "we'll never be short of change. And that little is a great deal to begin with."

When Irurtia heard from Chicharra's lips that they were thinking of naming him Minister and that the President desired to speak with him, he was deeply disturbed and remained pensively mute.

"Answer," urged Chicharra.

"Answer what?" the miser asked, as if stupefied. "I'll think it over. We'll see. That's a serious matter."

Chicharra waxed furious.

An organic defect, a deficiency in his very soul, rooted in the innermost recesses of his being prevented him from comprehending how a man could need to meditate as to whether it behooved him or not to go and see the President of the Republic in regard to accepting or rejecting a ministerial portfolio.

As to Irurtia, who had lived always not on illusions but on flesh and blood realities, and over whom vanity had never held sway — he had been overcome with amazement and mistrust on hearing Chicharra's tempting words. With amazement, because he had never imagined that the ministry of finance would be offered to an inexperienced person who had never even solicited it, through lack of the requisite qualifications and the rights to such preferment; with mistrust, because everything that related to politics, beginning with the public press, filled him with the greatest suspicion.

He had amassed a fortune and managed a capital without any need to interfere in public affairs; he was already a possessor of wealth. Now his fortune was increasing spontaneously, and only his intelligent surveillance was needed to insure prosperity. In politics, many, almost all, grow rich; that was certain; but how many were ruined! This was no profession for him. Other men, more experienced and more cunning than he, might swindle him. And then, even in the case of the least self-seeking, or the most scrupulous, or the most patriotic — what would be such a one's reward in Venezuela? What could be expected from past experience, as a result of inveterate habits? The papers would insult him,

those in power would bear him a grudge, and he would be confronted with prison, perhaps exile, perhaps ruin. . . .

On the other hand, to go to sleep an ordinary mortal and wake up a Minister of Finance, was no bagatelle. At the sole idea of "finance," which the wily Chicharra dangled before the miser's gaze, Irurtia's eyes shot flame.

But, no; he could not settle the matter without due consideration. He would give his reply on the following day.

"Reply tomorrow!" shouted Chicharra beside himself, his nasal appendage as red as a ruby. "You've gone crazy, my good man. You can't go to the President and say: Tomorrow; you can't say to the Liberal Party: Tomorrow; you can't answer me, the next Minister of the Interior, who come to offer you honors, power, wealth — you can't answer me with: Tomorrow. You don't know politics. In politics, friend Irurtia, there is no tomorrow, there is no yesterday, no 'I'll think it over,' no considering matters — nothing at all but looking for your opportunity and seizing it by the hair when it appears."

Irurtia was in a dilemma.

"There's my coach at the door," continued Chicharra. "Let's go to see the President. On the way you can think it over as much as you please. And remember that you're not going to commit yourself one way or the other; that you don't even have to let the President know we've talked the matter over. . . . You're going simply to let the President see you, listen to you, know you, judge you,

after which he, with his great foresight, is to decide whether he will find it feasible to convert you into a member of the Administration or not, placing you at a single stroke — he who is so powerful — in the highest spheres of politics."

Don Camilo listened in silence and bit his nails.

Chicharra continued:

"How many men would long to be in your boots now! How many would give the world to have Aquiles Chicharra step out of a coach before their doors and take them off in tow to become Ministers of Finance!"

"Good, General Chicharra," questioned Irurtia suddenly. "And what would be expected of me?"

"What the deuce do I know! Am I, perchance, the President of the Republic?" . . .

After a solemn pause meant to impress upon don Camilo the fact that Chicharra was not the President of the Republic, Aquiles continued:

"They'll expect nothing, I'm sure. Nothing — not even a protestation of allegiance to the Liberal Party."

And smiling, he added:

"Which I consider rather an untactful attitude, for at bottom you're something of a conservative."

Irurtia did not smile, like Chicharra, but became very serious, fearing already that he might lose the ministry which he had not yet accepted.

"I a conservative?" he replied, gravely. "Unless you mean a conservator of my money! I have always felt the liveliest sympathy for the Liberals. If I had entered politics, or if I were now to go into it, I'd be found in the ranks of the Liberals."

Chicharra arose, embraced him and said with an air of finality:

"Very well. If you're really a Liberal, act like one. Put on your hat and forward march."

Obediently, and without another word, Irurtia seized his cane and his hat and walked out after the obese, triumphant Aquiles.

He was not going to let himself be asked, if they should name him. Chicharra had almost convinced him, almost conquered him. Though he let himself be taken along, Irurtia walked with bowed head, somewhat timorous; like a maiden being led to the couch of her husband on the first night — like a gravid woman ready to give birth, like the pickpocket about to be initiated into the trade — like all who are on the way to losing a certain virginity, for the first time venturing a decisive act that will greatly affect their future.

The carriage rolled on toward the Palace of Miraflores. Coaches resounded upon the pavement of blue stone. The afternoon sun gleamed from the gold buttons of the coachman.

Chicharra was of the opinion that it was not yet time to go to the President's home, as the President would still be in his office. Not wishing to leave don Camilo, through fear that the miser might suddenly be seized with regret at his action, and not wishing to confess to Irurtia that they could do nothing for a short time, thus losing importance in the broker's eyes — Chicharra surrendered to a personal whim and directed the coach toward Santa Teresa. He had thought of Olga.

He left Irurtia in the coach, engrossed in deep

meditation, and now that the opportunity had come, fled to tell Olga that the future Minister of Finance — selected and almost elected — practically imposed on the government by him, it might be said — was Camilo Irurtia.

In the *zaguán* Chicharra encountered a man who was just coming out; he was beardless and wore a conical hat. The meeting shocked Chicharra, and as he greeted his niece, even before he took a seat, he asked her:

"Who's that clean-shaven chap I just met in the *zaguán?*"

Olga was a trifle perturbed. "Oh, nothing, a mere trifle, a passing caller," she replied. Chicharra, who was at that moment filled with plans and political projects, noticed nothing strange.

"He . . ." replied Andrés Rata's wife, "— he's a bull-fighter. He came . . . he came to try and sell us some tickets to his benefit performance."

"But you folks are in mourning."

"How are these people to know, when we are strangers to them?"

"And why didn't he approach Andrés, at the newspaper office?"

"I don't know. I told him that Andrés was not at home."

And in order to shift the conversation to another topic, she invited Chicharra, who was still standing in the corridor, to enter the living-room. She urged him with gesture and voice:

"For heaven's sake, Uncle. Come in and sit down."

They entered and sat down. Chicharra swore that he did wrong to accept.

"And why so, Uncle?"

"The fact is, I have no time, my dear girl. Time for nothing; no time for eating, nor even for breathing. Cursed politics!"

He was in no hurry to broach the matter that had brought him to Olga; he was preparing it with intricate preambulation; such was his manner. The Lord had taken pity upon Venezuela. At last the genuine Liberals were going to govern: he would be Minister of the Interior, director of politics he might say, and in a figurative sense, master of the nation.

"You, Uncle? You?"

"But, my dear woman, it seems you're surprised. Am I not worthy of that high charge? Then know: not only am I minister, but I'm taking Irurtia into the cabinet as Minister of Finance."

Olga was amazed. What imbeciles men were! A country at the mercy of this microcephalic uncle of hers — of those cucurbitaceans whom she knew so well and who she so heartily detested!

This instantaneous stupefaction Chicharra took for a sign of sincere and irrepressible admiration which might be translated into these words: "My! This man is a regular demon!"

Before señora Rata could utter a syllable, Chicharra assured her that he had come to her home — not to gain time, not because the President was still in session with the cabinet at that moment — but to hasten to tell Olga the good news: he, a minister; Irurtia likewise a minister. Why, he could almost make her a minister, too. He was an expert pilot in the political waters.

Olga tried to correct her extemporaneous exclamation of a few moments previous — that ingenuous "You, uncle!" which had struck Chicharra as being so ill apropos — and cunningly provoked an outburst of Achillean vanity.

Aquiles' having been made a minister had not surprised her in the least. Had not Chicharra been in Venezuela whatever he had wished to be, except Archbishop and President? He had been, like the eagles, for the heights. But that he should have elevated Irurtia to the ministry — now *this* was, frankly speaking, what struck her as utterly incredible.

"That's a master stroke, Uncle, a veritable *tour de force.*"

"You can't imagine! You'll never be able to imagine the struggle I had to get him in; a Herculean task. I'll tell you all about it later."

Chicharra passed his handkerchief across his forehead, as if in that very instant, after Titanic efforts, he had succeeded at last in lifting a weight of two hundred kilos.

A naturally egotistic idea occurred to Olga. With such good friends to speak for her in the government, why should it be difficult to obtain a good position for Andrés? There was no money in journalism. Not daring to insinuate her ambitious desire, she nevertheless reminded Aquiles, in a clever, indirect manner, that he was indebted partly to her for his ministerial position, as she had lent her services in the famous quadrille to turn the head of the satyr.

"Our collaboration didn't go to waste, did it, Uncle?"

"No, my dear girl; you did not plant in arid soil."

And as Chicharra did not show any signs of having grasped her meaning, Olga, assuming the rôle of an ingenuous maiden, added:

"How happy Andrés will be to hear all this!"

It was then that Chicharra began to make promises; but taking out his watch in the midst of his fine offers, he saw that it was time to leave.

"I must go, niece," he said, resolutely taking his hat.

Olga did not detain him.

He took his leave, his vanity content. At the outer street-door, up to which Olga accompanied him, Olga pressed his right hand affectionately and said:

"Good-bye, then, señor Minister. I congratulate you, principally upon having brought to the government as your creature, *the man of gold.*"

"Yes," he replied, epigramatically. "You may consider it done. The man of gold will be the man of the nation's gold."

VII

IRURTIA, MINISTER OF FINANCE

TOMASA moves about like an automaton. She cannot understand a thing of what is going on. She goes, comes, does, undoes, but lives as if in limbo and wracks her brains in an endless effort to make out what is taking place.

Her life and that of don Camilo were transformed overnight. All logic ceased in the world when that existence of rigid economy suddenly gave way to one of prodigal expenditures; when their solitary life became one of an incessant whirlwind of persons coming and going at all hours; when these two old creatures were turned inside out, just like a pair of stockings. Even her almost chronic rheumatism, treated by a specialist, fled this recently arrived splendor and showed up only from time to time.

Before all the adulation that was now heaped upon Irurtia, before the aspect of the new house, the new furniture, the coach — confronted with all this ministerial apparatus, Tomasa's admiration for Camilo rose to the skies. No longer did she dare, except when they were alone, to address him simply as Camilo, or to use the familiar pronoun with him. Good Lord, who could ever have thought it!

Tomasa's disorientation was easy to understand. What a transformation!

Irurtia changed houses for the third time in his

rather long existence. A minister of Finance cannot live in a usurer's lair. He went to the central section of the city, to one of his best pieces of property, which he had furnished at the nation's expense, if not with taste, with lavish display.

The State, too, pays the rent of the house in which Irurtia lives; or rather, don Camilo collects in advance the annual rental of the place, not without tripling or quadrupling the charge.

Overnight Irurtia's countless city houses, from the most humble shanty to the manorial mansion of the Agualongas, which had already been remodelled and made up-to-date, were taken by assault by willing tenants who did not haggle over prices, seemingly the more satisfied the higher the rents were fixed, like persons quite happy to be robbed. They were ambitious office-seekers and political aspirants who followed this stratagem in order to come into contact, even though it were indirect, with a Minister of Finance who was acquiring such influence in governmental spheres. Berroteran himself, with whom the aspirants often conspired in regard to renting one of Irurtia's properties — that selfsame cunning and phlegmatic Berroteran — had ascended to the position of a person who is fawned upon and whose handclasps are sought.

Don Camilo's influence, indeed, had risen and quickly spread.

From the very first week he had initiated a program of retrenchment that pleased the President greatly. The plan was not at all complicated, and because of its very simplicity was better understood by that chief executive, dispenser of all boons, be-

ginning and end, in his country, of all things; eager to conserve the public fortune that he might the more rapidly augment his own.

Irurtia's project consisted in reducing by a half, and by even two-thirds, the pay of the national employees; in reducing the appropriation for public education; in forbidding the expenditure of a *céntimo* in the purchase of men-of-war, guns, cannons; in suppressing, as useless, all diplomatic ministers and consuls from Venezuela to foreign countries; in doing away with, or almost annulling, the budget of internal improvements. No more telegraphs: there were so many kilometers of telegraph wire. No more railroads: let folks travel by the highways, stopping over in the villages and thus providing the villagers with a source of income; the railroad was the enemy of the small towns and ruined the general stores on the roads. No need to attract immigrants; they would come of their own accord when they would be needed; he would have no Farmers' Banks: the business of the capital city bankers would be ruined — the bankers who loaned and trusted the farmers with such self-denial. In addition, exportation must be taxed; whatever the country produced and sent out must leave something in the national treasury. Sources of income must be created.

Don Camilo had ideas of his own. The President approved them and fostered them as soon as he learned of them.

As a result of these doncamilesque reforms, Irurtia's reputation as a financier was established upon foundations of granite.

But don Camilo did not impose his innovations

without a bitter struggle with the partizans of the *statu quo*. Fortunately "the great financier," as Andrés Rata had christened him, counted upon two levers — something that had not occurred to Archimedes — and was able to dislocate the world, *his* world. These two marvellous levers that Archimedes had not known were the President and Aquiles Chicharra.

Not only was Irurtia opposed by the partizans of the *statu quo*, but also by those who aspired to improvements without providing the money with which to realize them. Both factions united against don Camilo. The daily press expounded various theories.

When any sheet dared to censure—oh, so timidly! — the economical policies of Irurtia, Andrés Rata jumped wildly into the arena.

Andrés Rata was the unconditional supporter of Irurtia's projects. "The plans of this great financier," he wrote, "who rivals the most eminent statesmen of England and France, will prove to be the salvation of the republic. . . . Let us accept them with ardent patriotic fervor."

The Cabinet celebrated a historic session when Irurtia presented his first projects of retrenchment.

In regard to the reduction of the salaries of national employees, it seemed ridiculous to various ministers that the government should surround itself with a court of starvelings.

"No, my dear colleagues," was Irurtia's opinion. "With what I assign to them they are able to live. I myself have lived upon less."

Aquiles Chicharra lent him his vigorous support:

"We must do away with this employomania," he vociferated. "If any of these petty employees isn't satisfied, let him go to work. Our fields lack hands."

And the President, already planning to appropriate to himself all the money saved by Irurtia's economies, asserted:

"The money saved by reducing the salaries of employees will be used to promote native industries."

For the rest, each minister limited himself to defending his branch.

The Minister of Education said:

"Without public education there does not exist, nor can there exist, a modern state. Education is the corner-stone of the future; let us create conscientious citizens if we wish to have a true fatherland."

The Minister of War:

"If we wish to have a true fatherland, let us purchase guns, cannon, aeroplanes, cruisers, submarines; let us build forts; let us establish arsenals; let us create a formidable army. Our dangers are many. How are we to defend our long coastline without many, many submarines, without a great number of warships and countless floating mines? How are we to defend our independence against the imperialistic appetites of the great powers without a huge, trained army?"

"Bah!" exclaimed Irurtia. "The United States will defend us against the great powers."

"And who will defend us against the defender?"

"That's a bit of excessive subtilizing, señor Minister of War," answered Chicharra. "The United

States, a country that I know well because I lived in its chief cities for three months and twelve days and acquired there the experience that I possess — the United States, I repeat, affirm and maintain, do not aspire to the political domination of Latin America, but to commercial hegemony."

"But are you not aware, General Chicharra," exclaimed the Minister of Foreign Relations," that to accept this commercial hegemony is to accept a form of dependence; and that commercial slavery is a forerunner of political slavery? Even more: the independence of a nation is an empty word, if that nation depends commercially and absolutely upon another nation. It's all the same whether a fellow is seized by the stomach or by the neck. That is why I believe that in order to defend ourselves against the United States, we ought to develop bonds of interest and all manner of relations with Europe and with the rest of South America. That is why I oppose the suppression of consuls and diplomatic representatives."

"All this money expended upon diplomatic representatives and consuls seems absolutely thrown out," said the President.

"That's just it," approved Chicharra, without letting the executive finish his sentence, and without even knowing just what opinion the man was going to express.

When the noise of the servile applause had ceased, the great military expert of a President was able to clarify his idea:

"The money spent upon diplomatic relations is a sheer waste. As far as our relations with the

powers are concerned, I, here in Caracas, can reach a thorough understanding with their representatives."

The idea was a brilliant one, worthy of the General President, who had only recently issued from the Andine caves, and worthy, too, of Chicharra's approval — Chicharra of the famous quadrille, the rival of Francisco Linares Alcántara.

The Minister of Foreign Relations thought it his duty to protest.

"No, General, in heaven's name! This is equivalent to the spontaneous renunciation by Venezuela, of its international rights; it means that we, of our own accord, reduce ourselves to the rank of a protectorate, to which agents are sent but from which representatives are not accepted."

The President could not see the matter in that light and there was no way of convincing him.

"To him who is not in accord with my policies and with the economical policies of Minister Irurtia, whose plan I approve in every detail, there is but one course left: to resign and withdraw."

This was enough. Compromises were sought, means of agreement were found, and all, all, all — the Minister of War, the Minister of Education, the Minister of Foreign Relations — all approved Irurtia's project as well as the internal, external and eternal policies of the General President.

The details of this memorable session of the Cabinet leaked out to the public, thanks to Chicharra's secret confidences.

Irurtia's prestige in the nation's eye rose to the clouds. "The machiavellism" and the foresight of

the already famous general don Aquiles Chicharra won sincere laudation. As for the President, ever since that day he was considered as a person with his own ideas and with the firmness of character to maintain them.

The well-conquered and well-merited influence that Irurtia exercised upon the President kept gaining in solidity as the days ran by; and as a reflection of this favor, the prestige of Irurtia among his friends and among strangers grew stronger and stronger.

In a very brief space of time Irurtia became, next to the President, the favorite of Caracas, the political paragon of the republic. His words aroused comment and thought, even on the part of those whom they did not affect. Deference was shown to his opinions; his simplicity of dress and the hygienic qualities of his vegetarian diet were found to be in excellent taste. It became a fad to go to sleep with the hens and rise with the dawn. Sobriety was transformed into a virtue. Virility made offerings to chastity. As for economy, altars were raised to it. We had been a nation of spendthrifts. What a lesson the great financier gave to everybody! All must be economical, like don Camilo Irurtia.

The prestige of the President alone rose above that of Irurtia. And how great must have been the President's prestige when that of Irurtia, by refraction, reached such limits!

On a certain morning, very early — about eight o'clock — a large number of persons was waiting in Irurtia's reception hall.

A liveried attendant was admitting them one by one into the cabinet where the financier, seated before a rosewood desk, received them and sent them forth in a trice.

The visitors left content, smiling, happy, prodigal with polite attentions. They had just spoken with Irurtia! Irurtia had promised them this or that!

At a given moment the Minister, through his attendant, conveyed his regrets that he could receive no more that day. The following morning, at the same hour, he would await the gentlemen now present. The cloud of visitors, the mob of seekers, broke up, sighing or muttering.

Irurtia wished to be alone, not because his duties required it, but because he was bored. It was not yet time for him to leave for the ministry, nor had his correspondence yet arrived. But he was weary of all these supplicating visitors: some begged one thing; others, another; but they all asked for something, they all delivered the same tedious discourses which he already knew by heart. No, he did not care to continue receiving. He yearned for liberty; a moment for himself, at least in his own home, since privacy was impossible in the ministry. What a life he led now!

He was satisfied with his lot, however! He could not imagine how he had not put his shoulder to politics sooner! He had lost precious years of his life vegetating like a parasite stuck to a social body, instead of serving it as head, or at least, muscle! A pity! It seemed that he had been defrauded. But the intensity of his present satisfaction com-

pensated for those other satisfactions that he had missed in his youth.

And these official pleasures did not consist merely in contributing to the happiness of his compatriots from his ministerial chair. In this unending flow of gold, thousands and thousands of shining coins trickled through his fingers and all of them fell, as if under the spell of an enchantment, subject to a fatal charm, into the ancient safe that Tomasa never dared to touch even with the duster, and which had ever been covered with a layer of venerable dust.

How regulate the most barefaced practises, the most cynical thefts? Not in vain had Camilo Irurtia learned book-keeping and native arithmetic. Minutely and patiently he went over his accounts to compute, from what he had purloined and filched during his few months of ministerial initiation, how much he might have provided himself with during those years he had lived in ignorance of the fact that there were ministries of finance in this world below. He had robbed himself. The thought of such a loss embittered his otherwise sweet existence.

Another drop of aloes, which was incessantly renewed, fell into the cup of the powerful, happy man whom everybody fawned upon: Rosaura.

Rosaura did not love him; at least, she did not love him as he had thought she did, and as he desired Rosaura to love him. To be sure, she had agreed to marry him; but it was also sure that in accepting him for her husband, Rosaura seemed more resigned than happy. As a practical man, he knew very well that at his age certain illusions are hard to inspire and foster; but he knew also, as a

practical man, when he was being received with enthusiasm and when he was merely being endured.

He could not bear the idea that Rosaura was simply putting up with him! He loved her and he was going to possess her; little need it trouble him whether she loved him or not. And yet — yes, it did matter! Why? Everybody knows: love that is mutual grows . . . and gives pleasure. The nature of love compels it to feed upon love, and if our amorous sentiment does not feed upon an analogous feeling that is roused in the beloved by a responsive sympathy, it complains, it suffers, and makes us unhappy.

How many, how many would give the world to marry him! Nor had insinuations and advances been lacking during the past few months. And to think that Rosaura should not love him, or that she should accept him coldly — she who was so passionate! That she should treat him with hauteur — she who was so gentle! That she should receive him with resignation — she who was always so happy in contributing to the pleasure of others!

Irurtia was right to ponder the matter; he was right to complain in the midst of his prosperity, like that pessimistic and disillusioned king Solomon.

His common sense, his flair for realities, his perspicacious judgment of things did not abandon him in his love affair — a matter in which most men lose their reason, their judgment, and even that common sense which is the talent of the mediocre. Rosaura had agreed to marry him; but at what a price! Life ended for her on the day on which she had accepted him; and on that same day, in that

very moment began a life of gloom, a hellish existence, the tortures of the damned — all gnashing of teeth, all tears.

First of all she had yielded to the insistence of Olga, who urged her day and night. She sacrificed herself for her niece. Olga asked it? How refuse to please her? How deny Olga the rest of her existence, when she had dedicated the best years of her youth to her niece?

Andrés Rata likewise urged her, placing her between the sword and the wall with his flattering arguments. She was going to be the woman of gold, the queen of Caracas, the mistress of the nation, perhaps the wife of the future president of the Republic! What mattered gold to her! What mattered it to her to be the wife of the president, to be queen, to be a flattered leader of such a vile society! And even if the society were not so loathsome! She longed only for an obscure life, a silent, Christian existence — until there should come the hour — and would to God it came quickly — of a good death.

General Chicharra was no less insistent. He appealed on behalf of his wife, of Tula his first-born; of his other daughters, of everybody. His ingenious mind had recourse to multiple and varied appeals.

Alcira herself — though indirectly, won over by Olga, deceived by Chicharra, wheedled by Andrés Rata and coaxed by the members of the Chicharra family — contributed to the result.

Rosaura was surrounded by a conspiracy — a plot against her spinsterhood, an assault upon her solitude, an imposition upon her good faith, a strong

summons to her noble heart. She protested, she wept, she begged; in vain. None had pity. She could not oppose them all; at last she succumbed. From that moment her bosom resembled a cushion riddled with daggers and her face was that of a Dolorosa.

Irurtia, then, had only too many reasons for not feeling quite content with the kind of love he inspired, with the hand that was offered him, with his sunken-eyed, resigned future wife — the victim of life and a prey to grief.

In his senile, almost retrospective love, in his tardy passion, Irurtia, who now lacked nothing except a happy heart, the comforts of old age, the spice of life, a family, a home — sighed for what he did not have: for the mate who is content with and proud of her husband, for the satisfied woman who casts about her a glow of affection, the tranquillity of intimacy, domestic happiness.

This Rosaura did not at all resemble the Rosaura of his dreams. He was going to take into his house a tear rather than a sunbeam.

He was aroused from his thoughts by a respectful, timid knock at the door. It was the minister's private secretary, who asked permission to hand him a batch of letters and periodicals.

Before opening his correspondence, Irurtia turned to the newspapers, skimming the pages in a rapid survey. He glanced only at the headlines, and, if there were any, the signatures. The only thing that interested him in that confusion of black and white was his name. With practise he had acquired an incredible skill in this hunt after his own name;

always he would fall upon his name in the midst of the gray steppe of the print, with the voracity of a condor, of a white eagle, of a hawk, or a falcon upon its prey. No longer was he filled with his old fear of the press. How much honey could flow in the printer's ink! Besides, a Minister of Finance in Venezuela has no fear of anything.

At last he began to tear open envelopes and read or half read a large number of letters. Some he marked with a blue pencil; others, with a red; two or three cabalistic signs were enough for him. The secretary would know how to answer them; it was for this purpose he was now sorting them out.

While the secretary was busy classifying the correspondence, Irurtia, with a sheet before his eyes, remained absorbed in meditation, as if this missive had awakened a recollection.

It was a letter from Cirilo Matamoros.

The poor man besought don Camilo not to forget him in his imprisonment. He had placed all his hope in Irurtia, who was now all-powerful. The trial had already cost him a great deal of money, and the end was not in sight. He had been compelled to close up his *pulpería,* and to surrender his land and property as payment to his creditors — to those cursed Germans of Caracas who did not feel the slightest compassion for him in his misfortune. Don Camilo would not be like the German bloodsuckers: he would be moved by Matamoros' sad plight.

After the signature came a postcript:

My wife went daily for a month to your new house, to entreat a favor of you, our

only recourse in our terrible position. The doorkeeper would not let her pass, nor even tell Tomasa that she was there. I blame nobody but my luck, which is bad indeed. Don't forget me in my misfortune, don Camilo.

Don Camilo took a pen and wrote:

Friend Matamoros:

I have received your letter and answer it at once in my own handwriting. This should serve to console you and indicate how highly I esteem you.

I have done, and will continue to do, all I can for you, although during the past few weeks because of an avalanche of work, the matter slipped my mind. But above all, have confidence in the judges and in the righteousness of your cause.

Don't forget that I am in a very delicate position and that I have no right in my capacity as minister, to influence any judge, without exposing myself to the penalty of the laws, and without discrediting the administration which I have the honor of serving. I repeat: your case is a good one. I have absolute confidence in the honesty and the rectitude of our judiciary.

Tomasa sends you her kindest regards. I am, your affectionate friend,

CAMILO IRURTIA

Don Camilo was already getting to know politics. The famous general Aquiles Chicharra had lost no time. Had he read Irurtia's reply, the master would not have been ashamed of his pupil.

VIII

THE RIDDLE

A WARM, golden summer afternoon.

The waning sun tips with flame the summits of the hills of Caracas toward the south. The houses in the Paraiso section, amid the gardens on either side of the Avenue, swarm with women. The meadows of the Guayre, with their breath of the fields, temper the dying fires of day. The river Guayre itself exhales its cool freshness and glides along under the iron bridges, perhaps recalling other happier days, when it was a personage of greater account in the city.

The pedestrians walk along the sidewalks in a leisurely procession, meditatively and considerately. The roadway is packed with carriages. From countless houses flash women's smiles in the direction of an elegant victoria, at whose passage the strollers, here and there, doff their hats most deferentially. It is the President, the tin-god.

Somewhat further back another victoria attracts smiles, although not so expressive as the previous ones, and doffings of the hat, though less deferential.

This coach contains the Minister of Finance and the Minister of Internal Affairs: Camilo Irurtia, very prim and spruce, and Aquiles Chicharra, leaning back most contentedly with his legs spread out.

"You see what the world is, don Camilo," said

Chicharra to his companion. "But a short while ago not one of these women knew you. Now they all bathe you in smiles."

"Let's talk of serious matters. Do you know what occurs to me? That neither I, because of my relations with Rosaura, nor you, as the husband of an Agualonga, ought to be out on a public drive, seeing that Eufemia's death took place so recently."

"Recently? From the looks of things neither days, weeks nor months pass as far as you're concerned. . . . Besides, friend Irurtia, we are public figures; we belong more to the nation than to our families; we are, in short, exempt from certain mere formalities."

Chicharra bowed to two or three others, to right and to left, and then continued:

"Speaking of the family, just listen to me: Aquiles Chicharra never forgets his friends, his relatives or his collaborators. The result is one of the public and private virtues of Aquiles Chicharra. Or, to put it in a better way: among the faults of which his many and undeserved enemies accuse Aquiles Chicharra, there may not be reckoned forgetfulness of his relatives or friends."

Irurtia could not understand where all this exordium was leading to. Chicharra, according to his custom, did not go straight to the point; but at last, when he could no longer draw out his empty prologue, he expressed his thought.

He wished Irurtia's support in obtaining a consulate for Andrés Rata. Although both the number and the salary of the consuls had been reduced as a result of Irurtia's program, Chicharra wished to

keep the promise he had given Olga, and to satisfy Andrés. Don Camilo, who was so intimately associated with the Agualonga family, ought to support the candidacy of the journalist.

"But you're not talking to the point at all, my dear General," replied don Camilo. "These people haven't been giving a thought to consulates for some time. And neither does Rosaura care to have Olga leave the country."

"That can't be. Why, every day Andrés keeps begging me to intercede and have him named consul to some place or other, even to Haiti; and, moreover, since I promised Olga some time ago that I'd make a consul of her husband, I'd like to keep my word. Ingratitude in matters of friendship, family relations or party associates is, as I have already said, not among the defects that Aquiles Chicharra may be accused of by his many, gratuitous, odious and cowardly enemies."

"We're not talking of enemies now, but of your relatives, General. And I repeat: you're on the wrong track. They don't want to be consuls or proconsuls. Olga herself told me so a hundred times."

"Here's a riddle, then! The one begs me for it, the other refuses it from you: a riddle! It'll be best for me to solve it at once. I'll see Olga, whom I haven't seen in God knows how long."

"That would be the best and most practical thing: and as soon as we know what they want — according to the desires they make known to you, in whom they have greater confidence — we'll see about getting it for them."

"And what about Rosaura? She doesn't want Olga to leave the country, does she? Hasn't she asked you for something different?"

"How little you know her! She hasn't it in her to ask me for anything. The best thing would be for Olga and Rata to get together, decide on something, and speak up clearly."

Irurtia was right. . . .

Somewhat later the minister of finance ordered the coachman to take him home; and Chicharra, with nothing on hand before dinner, and seizing his opportunity, went off to Olga's house.

There was indeed a riddle.

Olga, who had always dreamed of travel and adventure, had, before Irurtia and Chicharra became ministers, desired a consulate for Andrés; it was to aid Andrés in becoming a consul that she had lent her collaboration to the famous ball. On his side, Andrés, ever since Chicharra and Irurtia had become ministers, had ceased to aspire to a consulship. His ambition had risen. He had even imagined himself occupying a customs office, as administrator and inspector. So much business is done in a customs house and a functionary of this branch could get rich so quickly! But the rôles had changed. No longer did Andrés dream of beaches nor of Venezuela's golden strands; rather, he was pressing in his requests for some foreign office, anywhere at all, "even in Haiti," while Olga, despite her roving spirit and the fascination exercised upon her by the unknown, refused to leave her native land for any consideration whatsoever, even if she were flogged.

Aquiles determined to solve the riddle, not out of

mere curiosity, but also because he wished to satisfy the journalist, to whom he was indebted for so many kindly journalistic favors, and who always lent himself with the most humble compliance to whatever was required. Besides, Andrés could be of use to him in the future. Hence Chicharra's boasting of his fidelity to friends. Hence, too, when he left Irurtia, his visit to Olga.

The latter found it easy to convince Aquiles.

Leave the country? How silly! None could understand this better than Chicharra himself, with his acute penetration! He, a lynx, a Machiavelli, with eyes that could pierce the densest darkness — eyes of a nyctalops — and a brain that could fathom the most abstruse questions — how could he miss seeing the advantage that Andrés and herself would reap by remaining in Caracas! In the first place, Irurtia. There was no trusting don Camilo too much: he was wily, and as slippery as soap; quite capable, at the very last moment, finding himself surrounded by adulation and power, to betray his word and renounce the marriage. In that case all their preparatory labors would go to naught, and how many smiling hopes! For ministries pass; and the money, the fortune, the don Camilo of gold, remain.

In the second place: Andrés. Did Chicharra, who was so prudent, just, fair, imagine that Andrés was going abroad to die of hunger, or live from hand to mouth like any ordinary poor devil, like Tom, Dick or Harry, who are named consul because they're the nephew of the cousin of a man who knows a minister? Andrés had lent valuable services in the press. He was lending them now. He would lend

them in the future. And all this gratis, as a vocation, through love of the work, through party spirit. And now, was he to be paid off with a consulate? Now, when he had his own uncle Chicharra as minister of the interior — Chicharra, one of the most finely balanced minds in the republic, and one of the foremost statesmen of the country?

Nor would she say anything about Irurtia, she averred, since he was a novice in politics, and did not know that in politics some are of stone and others of sand. But this very Irurtia — she was none the less sure — would hold out a friendly hand to Andrés and help him to a position of advantage, at least, if not of eminence, and commensurate with his list of gratuitous services. It was all as clear as day: they ought to remain in Caracas.

And she had not mentioned still another very, very important reason: Rosaura. How abandon Rosaura, whom she loved as one loves a mother, Rosaura, who was so dispirited since Eufemia's death! She had been getting thinner and thinner, until she looked like a skeleton; she, who formerly had been so plump. She cried without ceasing; it was easily to be seen that she was going through unspeakable agony; she was unhappy. It looked to Olga as if Eufemia's case were being reproduced in the sister. How forsake her under such circumstances! It would be monstrous.

Chicharra was convinced.

"You're more than right, my girl," he confessed. "And I hadn't thought of any of the things you've told me. The fool knows more in his own house than the wise man does in somebody else's."

Olga, smiling at the word "fool," replied:

"Thanks, Uncle."

"No, no; pardon me, my dear niece. That's a proverb. These matters you've just told me hadn't occurred to me, because politics absorbs me; problems of State fill my time and my brain."

At this moment Andrés entered the room. He had just returned from the office.

Aquiles was very much delighted. Olga was delighted very much less.

"You've come just in time," said Chicharra. "And now let's solve the puzzle."

"What puzzle?" queried Andrés.

"Don't you think it's a puzzle, and a Chinese puzzle, at that — a regular brain-splitter — when you ask me for a consulate while Olga urges me not to give it to you? Her reasons are sound."

"So are mine."

"Ah! Then you don't agree on it?" asked the general, jestingly. "Have we clouds on the domestic horizon? Bah, these are mere summer cloudlets. A little shower of tears from Olga; or a few rolls of thunder and flashes of lightning from Andrés — and it's all over."

Husband and wife both protested. Summer cloudlets! Not a one! What a notion!"

"Olga has just been telling me her reasons for not thinking it advisable to leave Venezuela at this time. She has convinced me. But neither of you has told me what you aspire to."

"A post in the President's secretariat," interposed Olga, "would probably satisfy Andrés."

"I don't want any secretarial positions."

"A directorship in a ministry?" suggested Chicharra.

"Not that either."

The general was of the opinion that unless they both agreed on something, it would be difficult to get Andrés a place. For every public office there were forty candidates, even before the position was vacant.

Now Andrés explained his eagerness for a consular position. He wished to make the sea-voyage for reasons of health. Besides, his mind needed a change from that overheated atmosphere of political hatred. And finally, he wished to write a work upon *The Pioneers of The Liberal Cause in Venezuela;* for this purpose he needed to consult foreign archives and the documents they contained and to spend one or two years working, far from the drudgery of journalism.

These reasons, and especially the last, struck the famous Aquiles as being of substantial importance. In his mind he ran over his own biographical data and prepared to write them out and give them to Andrés. Chicharra could already behold himself in the company of General Guzman Blanco and the lawyer J. P. Rojas Paul, not far from don Vicente Amengual, in the gallery of the notables of Venezuelan liberalism.

Thus, after having agreed to Olga's reasons, he subscribed to Andrés's reasons likewise. He agreed fully with both. And both were dissatisfied.

"Weather-vane!" accused Olga, smilingly.

And Andrés, smiling too, cried:

"Weather-vane!"

Chicharra left the house, deceived by both Olga and Andrés. Neither had told him a word of the truth.

Olga wished to remain in Caracas because she was in love; Andrés desired to leave because he was jealous.

It was all the bull-fighter's fault — that hairless Spaniard with the conical hat, whom Chicharra had bumped into one day in Andrés Rata's *zaguán.*

The latter knew the sort of stout horns with which his wife had begun to deck him. Had he not learned of it for himself, there were not lacking those who were ready to hold up the mirror before him.

He had received about a hundred anonymous notes; his friends let out hints; hostile periodicals printed jesting insinuations, and the cartoonists began to draw caricatures representing him bearing short horns, his curly hair in front standing dishevelled on end, like the legs of a scorpion — or rather, resembling a heifer's little horns. In his song, this poet was like a bird; his horns related him to the stag: he was an elaphornithoid poet. Had he been capable of procreation, he would have engendered an ornothaurus. All Caracas knew this except the perspicacious Aquiles.

Andrés Rata lacked the courage to prevent the barbarian of a bull-fighter from continuing his relations with Olga, or rather, to wash away the insult with blood; and he lacked the character to dominate Olga. He chose flight — leaving Venezuela with his wife.

Time would not file away his horns, but perhaps it would work the miracle of making Caracas forget

them, or at least, of so habituating the city to them that it would no longer besmear the husband's reputation, nor riddle the minotaurized fellow with arrows, nor enliven the newspaper pages with those caricatures that represented him with scorpion horns growing from his temples.

In order to win Chicharra's support in the matter of asking a consulate, and knowing Chicharra's colossal vanity, he had conceived the strategic reference to his work upon Liberal notables. He had never had any intention of writing any such work. "Notables! . . ." he thought to himself. "Pigs! . . . now they leave me face to face with my shame! Let the bull-fighters of Spain write them up in the newspapers!"

As for Olga, she felt that she was truly in love this time — in love as never before — madly in love.

She had seen the *torero Feúco* for the first time in the ring, at an afternoon performance. The gladiator's notoriety, aureoled in glory, turned the giddy-pated girl's heart. She returned to the plaza on other afternoons and wore out her palms applauding the *espada.*

But Eufemia had died and Olga could attend no more bull-fights.

A pity! The tickets were sent to Andrés's office, and were complimentary admissions. Happily there lives in this world that kind goddess, accident. One day Olga went to her dressmaker — a Spanish woman — to try on a mourning-dress that she was to wear in memory of Eufemia, and there she met the bull-fighter, a Sevillian, as was the modiste; the *torero,* indeed, had been friends with the dressmaker in Spain.

During the fitting of the dress Olga praised the art of the matador so highly, that, when she left, the modiste thought she would be pleasing her customer by remarking to the *torero:*

"*Feúco,* this lady is a great admirer of yours."

The *torero* muttered something, respectful and confused at the same time; but Olga cast a glance at him — a single glance — one of those with which a woman surrenders herself to a man.

That was enough.

They met again, and yet again, as if by accident, at the home of the obliging and complaisant Spanish seamstress. Afterwards they met elsewhere.

Then came the Carnival. One afternoon she told her husband that she was going over to see the Agualongas; but the *toreador* was already awaiting her in a coach with their disguises prepared. They played carnival in fine fashion, even with Andrés Rata, whom they came upon during the day.

This *torero,* who was more bestial than his bulls, and more powerful, could scarcely do anything but roar; but his masculine character dominated the female dominator. For the first time in her life Olga knew the love of an intensely virile man, of a breeding male; and for the first time she surrendered her will. . . . This brutish, brutal bully imposed his will upon the gilded, reasoning tigress with the beautiful body and the horrible soul.

Feúco, having learned through Olga of Andrés's consular ambitions, made his concubine swear that she would never leave Caracas while he was performing there. *Feúco,* a vainglorious scoundrel, desired to exhibit his conquest. He looked forward

also to having Olga elope with him to Mexico, whither he would go when his Caracas contract expired.

"I must draw the line at that, *Feúco,*" said Olga.

And *Feúco* replied:

"Very well: I'll go alone."

In the meantime, neither Andrés Rata, nor Aquiles Chicharra, nor Camilo Irurtia, nor Mandiga[20] himself were able to get Olga away from Caracas and the arms of the bull-fighter *Feúco.*

[20] An "Americanism" equivalent, in this instance, to our "the devil" or "the deuce."

IX

ACTÆON'S TRADE

WHEN, that night, Irurtia appeared in the Municipal Theatre, at about nine o'clock, he was greeted with a thunderous outburst of applause. The family-circle wearied its arms in enthusiastic clapping. In the pit, the men rose to their feet. The women in the boxes directed their opera-glasses at the recently arrived minister.

"What's taking place?" asked a certain red-faced Muscovite who had landed the night before at La Guaira. "Why this unanimous enthusiasm at the presence of this man? Is he the head of the nation? Is he some general that has triumphed over foreign enemies? Has he performed some signal service for his country?"

"He's simply a former broker," was the reply, "and is now Minister of Finance and Public Credit. But at this day he is, next to the President, the most powerful of our citizens. He is also the only hope of our country."

"The only hope?"

They had to explain it to him.

The President, a cruel, rapacious fellow, representing the military barbarocracy, and receiving the support of the vilest and most reactionary elements of the Republic, exercised an almost military dic-

tatorship rather than a civil government. His cronies of Caracas, the mountain savages, and the servile creatures of the whole nation, worshipped him on their knees, as if he were an idol; in like manner he was adored by as many rascals who yearned for monopolies, and by all who exploited such powers, by all the sons of fraud, all the fathers of speculation, all the veterans of political crime: those whose hands and consciences were equally filthy, those without scruple or shame. On the other hand he was considered with a hidden hatred — a hatred all the more intense on that account — by the sound part of the nation — the men who toiled, who studied, who lived decent lives. And with no attempt to hide their feelings, the people detested him before his very face.

By one of the many whims of his neuropathic temperament, the President had resolved to retire for several months to private life in the country.

The Vice-President, one of the most stalwart bulwarks of autocracy, and a former butcher of Tachira who had achieved wealth and repute under his patron's favor, was thus left at the head of the government. The republic did not hate him as much as it hated the President; but it detested him far more.

Despite his many defects, the President possessed authentic virtues, such as courage and patriotism — a patriotism of his own kind, but none the less undeniable. The Vice-President, named Juan Bisonte, was not in the least bit distinguished; his intelligence was that of a mole; his hypocrisy, that of a Jesuit; his heart, that of a slave; his cowardice,

that of a hermaphrodite janissary. His only god was money; his only thirst, that for gold; his only virtue, that of fidelity to his protector, the President.

The latter knew him as a most incapable person, and despised him as the vilest of his lackeys. Wherefore, though leaving him according to legislative mandate as the nominal head of the government, the magistrate brought Irurtia to the presidential palace at Miraflores, installed him there as his representative and made him the genuine director of the executive department — the responsible head.

Irurtia was thus made the chief figure of the administration; Bisonte, the figurehead.

Irurtia, then, the former broker, was the President of the Republic.

The stranger to whom these details of Venezuelan politics were made known, then said:

"But does the presidency of the republic in itself inspire so much respect in Venezuela that they applaud him who holds the office, even if he be nothing but a barefaced broker?"

"No, it isn't that."

"What is it, then?"

It was a complicated matter. They explained it anew.

They hated the President, they despised the Vice-President and were anxious to get rid of both. By applauding Irurtia, by showering him with adulation and fawning, they tried to awaken in him the ambition for supreme command. None better than Irurtia, because of his present situation and his wealth, to effect a coup d'etat, overthrow those who

now usurped the power, and rise, with the good wishes of all, to the canopied throne of the President. A hundred elements of conspiracy were already enveloping him and directing him. This thunderous applause was the work of a hired claque, prepared behind the scenes by skilful masters of Venezuelan politics.

Camilo Irurtia, yesterday a despised broker, a social corpuscle without a name and worth no more than his hidden gold sacks, was now the most powerful, most adulated, most happy of men, the arbiter of the republic and its most shining hope.

When Andrés Rata came home from Irurtia's apotheosis, he experienced the blackest, most unhappy hours in his life of professional adulation. Poor hired journalist!

His wife was not there.

On the night-table lay a brief, tragic note explaining her absence. Olga told him in those few lines that she had fled in quest of that happiness which he had not been able to give her.

Nervous and broken, Andrés Rata could not sleep all night.

Dawn found him at Miraflores. When the doors opened, he entered, before the baker and the milkman.

Irurtia had not yet arisen, and Andrés Rata had to wait for about two hours before the minister could receive him.

When Irurtia learned of Olga's flight he raised his hands to his head:

"But that creature is a madwoman. The spatter

of this mud will doubtless soil even me. Rosaura will surely die of shame and grief."

Andrés begged him to have Olga detained at La Guaira. Irurtia himself telephoned to that place on the very instant.

The torero *Feúco* — they replied — had just left, accompanied by a woman whom they did not know, on a vessel that had weighed anchor at seven that morning, bound for Cuba and Mexico.

"I can't remain in Caracas," groaned Andrés Rata. "Just imagine how my enemies will feed upon my misfortune!"

He asked for any consulate at all.

"Before noon," replied Irurtia, "you'll have the appointment in your house. I'll have your traveling expenses sent along at the same time, and advance pay for five or six months. Flee at once. If there's any boat that leaves between now and nightfall, leave this very day. If not, tomorrow, by the Royal Mail. Good-bye. Be sure and write to me."

When Andrés returned to his home he gathered together the things he needed most, a trunk and a valise; he wrote a brother to see to the clearing of the house and to the settlement of his private affairs. That same afternoon he left on a Dutch steamer.

Wearied from not having slept the night before, that night on board he slumbered soundly. The following day he arose very early; and scarcely had he finished his breakfast when he started a poem against his wife, calling her traitress.

Ever since then, what has the minotaur done but sing of his horns, calling his wife perfidious in in-

sipid stanzas and exploiting the compassion that he arouses in the unwary. His misfortune has been his trade. If it may be said of any Venezuelan writer that he has lived by his head, that writer is Andrés Rata.

PORNICHET, 1913. — MADRID, 1914.

THE END

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